

Chapter 1

For him, the world ended when *he* fell. Falling, falling, crashing onto the hard stone floor, a victim of a deflected curse from his treacherous wand.

For Augustus Rookwood, it was over.

He knew he had no time anymore. Out of time, out of space, out of mind, and into darkness. The Dementors would be coming for him, and for a traitor, a Ministry informant to the Death Eaters, there would be no mercy. Countless files had been destroyed, smuggled out of Ministry hands, or falsified, not to mention all of the secret projects that he had either sabotaged or stolen.

He should never have come to the Ministry that night, to watch his master fall. He should never have fought at all. He should have stayed back in the Ministry, perfecting his desperate project, his last chance to restore everything.

Despite the fact that prophecies were only *technically* meant for those they were destined for, the thoughts that remained in the Pensieve could be examined with time. Rookwood had seen the prophecy about the Dark Lord and Harry Potter. He knew that his master was doomed to fall... unless he could change the past. Unless, by any sort of wild chance, he could go back and stop the prophecy from ever coming...

He hurried along the dark corridor towards the black door, thinking about the narrow chances that allowed him to escape the clutches of the Aurors. The euphoria of the Aurors at their victory, dulling their magical senses to the presence of the massive Muggle vehicle that soared across the sky. The weak grip of Dawlish as Rookwood attacked him and blew him off his broom. The missed curses fired by the Aurors as the Death Eater streaked off towards the north-west, towards the open ocean. The hard gusts of wind that prevented the Aurors from following him.

The door flew open in his hands as he wrenched the silver handle with shaking hands. The Ministry wouldn't expect him to come *here*,

to his former workplace. They would think it much too dangerous, much too stupid. All the real Ministry personnel were at Hogwarts, securing the school and celebrating.

And that left the Department of Mysteries free for the taking.

Stepping into the circular room, he muttered "*Point me*" as the door shut and the room began to spin. It was the only real way to keep his direction as the doors shuddered to a halt. Immediately, he approached the eastern door – behind which was his prize.

Yanking the door open, he took a second to marvel at the device. A series of three brass towers in a line, all topped with a massive, gyroscopically-spinning hourglass. Golden sand trickled within the glass, sending sickly reflections dancing along the walls. The gears whirled and churned as the towers clicked in perfect synchronization – with every second of time. Two tightly strung wires connected the left and right towers to the center, which seemed thicker and emitted a ghastly orange light as it clicked. Underneath the center-most tower was a chair and a control table, lined with levers and knobs, almost like the dashboard of a Muggle machine. Beneath it, however, was not circuitry but twenty spinning Time-Turners. It had taken hours to perfect the tiny devices, rebuild the cache that had been destroyed two years ago, but he had done it. All of them now operated his device.

It had been his dearest dream, his ambition. He had negotiated with Bagman all those years ago to get the money he needed, in exchange for a future job offer. His project had been hidden and disassembled a number of times, but he always rebuilt it. And in the year when the Dark Lord had taken over, he had the chance to perfect it.

It was not a Time-Turner, but something far greater. It was a Time-Twister, strong enough to send a group of people to any point in time – backwards or forwards. Rookwood built in that function out of curious fancy and had only tried it a single time. He had been horrified with what he saw, and would not speak of the horrors that he knew would come.

The River has to fork to avoid that calamity, he thought wildly as he settled himself into the chair and flipped a dozen switches with shivering hands. He dialed in the longitude, latitude, exact position, and year, then took a moment to wipe his sweating brow. *The Dark Lord's fall will result in the destruction of magic... of our world... in twenty-five years hence from this, it will all end...*

He strapped himself securely into the chair. He had used Time-Turners at dozens of occasions and was used to going back, but never this far. Never back almost twenty years...

He slid his wand into a socket on the table and, after taking three deep breaths, he pulled the activation lever, preparing himself for the temporal shift.

It felt like a blast of cold water, surging over his body as the sands whirled and hissed as the hourglasses spun ever faster. The leftward tower began burning with a sulfurous light, filled with sheer power as the room dissolved around him... as he entered the River of Time. The magical sphere of energy protected his body as he hurtled faster and faster, through years and years...

With a shuddering crash and the agonized squeal of machinery, the physical world erupted around him, revealing a cold, charred forest. He gasped and swore as he yanked the straps free holding him to the chair. He saw the date: *September 13th, 1979*.

He had time now. Not much, but time.

He staggered forward towards the small stone building set between the trees – the Dark Lord's private sanctum, where he only invited his chosen Death Eaters, and no others.

With the haggard dignity of desperation, he hammered on the door with his left arm, which dissolved beneath his hand.

"Come in," a cold voice issued from the room, and Rookwood staggered in, panting and shaking with emotion to hear his lord alive again.

The Dark Lord looked up, shock and surprise on his face. “You weren’t on duty, Rookwood, and I did not request you here. And you look... different. Older...” The Dark Lord’s wand was out in a second. “Who are you? You’re clearly not Augustus Rookwood –”

“You’re wrong there, my Lord,” Rookwood said quickly. “I don’t have the time to completely explain what has happened, but trust me when I say this – I *am* Augustus Rookwood, though not the one you knew.”

The Dark Lord’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t lie to me. I *know* my Death Eaters.”

“My Lord, I would never lie to you – I am not that stupid. But you *must* listen to me. I am from the future, a future that I pray you never know. A future where you are brought down, are killed.”

The Dark Lord seemed to scoff. “Impossible. I’ve gone farther than anybody along the path towards defeating death –”

“Your Horcruxes, you mean,” Rookwood interrupted. At the Dark Lord’s astonished expression, Rookwood could not help but roll his eyes. “They won’t be enough. *He* will destroy them all.”

The Dark Lord narrowed his eyes. “Who’s ‘he’?”

“Harry Potter,” Rookwood spat with as much malice as he could bring to his mouth. He felt a cold gust of wind against his skin and he shivered involuntarily.

The Dark Lord, for his part, looked confused. “Who is this ‘Harry Potter’? Is he of any relation of James Potter?”

“Yes. His son, by the Mudblood Lily Evans,” Rookwood growled. “I assume you know who she is – they are both members of the Order of the Phoenix.”

“I’ve heard about this Evans girl,” the Dark Lord sneered. “She appears to be quite skilled for her age.”

A disturbing thought came to Rookwood’s mind. “Who did you hear about her from? Severus Snape, by any chance?”

The Dark Lord recoiled slightly. “Why, yes –”

“My Lord, you might not realize this yet, but *you cannot trust Severus Snape*. He might not betray us yet, but he will become a traitor in the future. Does he ever actually speak of the Mudblood in public?” Rookwood sneered. “Even I wouldn’t think he’s that stupid –”

“He never actually says anything, but I am a superb Legilimens,” the Dark Lord remarked lightly.

“Ah. Excellent magic, Legilimency.”

“Indeed,” the Dark Lord replied, with the air of sampling a fine pastry. “It’s also the only reason you’re still alive.”

Rookwood froze. “What –”

“Oh, relax, Rookwood. I know you’ve been telling the truth, at least as you know it. I am inclined to believe you – for now – but I would advise you not to lie here.”

Rookwood resumed his pacing. “My Lord, I would have no reason to lie to you – I’m doing this in your best interest. I have no desire to see Potter defeat you again.”

“Remind me how this happens,” the Dark Lord growled, his tone suddenly dangerous. “I’d like to know about my plans failed.”

“Like you planned, you went after James Potter and Lily Evans on the incomplete intelligence of Severus Snape and Peter Pettigrew – who will eventually become your spy, by the way – and something went wrong. Evans’ death triggered ancient magic that protected her son, and your curse rebounded. You were nearly destroyed – less than the meanest ghost, you said you became – but somehow, you revived yourself.”

“Of course I did,” the Dark Lord mused. “Go on.”

“You regained all the power you lost, plus more. You took Hogwarts and the Ministry... and then everything went wrong. Harry Potter

somehow destroyed all of your Horcruxes and fought you... and he deflected your Killing Curse somehow. He defeated you..."

There was a long silence. Finally, the Dark Lord fixed his furious eyes on Rookwood. "And what must I do to stop this undesirable future?"

Rookwood took a deep breath. "Potter's victory was predicted by a prophecy, one given by Sybil Trelawney to Albus Dumbledore and partially overheard by Snape. It predicted your downfall – changed the future, if you think in that frame of mind – so to remove the prophecy from the picture, one must kill the Seer."

The Dark Lord gave a lipless grin. "You are suggesting we dispose of Sybil Trelawney?"

"Absolutely. It must be done impersonally – we can't have her utter the prophecy when she sees you cast the curse. I'd also dispose of Severus Snape, just to remove all implements of the passage. You do not have to kill him – I advise it, of course, as he is a traitor – but he must be removed from your service."

"And what impact will these deaths have on the River of Time?" the Dark Lord asked harshly. "Will it be sufficient to bend the course of history?"

Rookwood swallowed hard. Another chill gust spread across his skin, but he ignored it. "It should. Trelawney's death will cause a Time Torrent – a period of stasis for all who use magic. It will likely last about ten years. As for Snape's death, I can't be sure."

"You aren't sure about a lot of this, Rookwood," the Dark Lord growled.

"My Lord, I *don't* know a lot about this," Rookwood snarled. "All I know is that the death of Trelawney will cause a Time Torrent, because when her soul is released with dark magic, it will go straight into the River."

"Then why don't all the other deaths of magical folk influence the River?"

Rookwood clenched his fists, ignoring the persistent gust of cold wind that was tormenting him. “Because *you have foreknowledge*. You know what you must do because I am telling you! Whenever complete prophecy or any sort of magical foreknowledge is used to bring about murder, it breaks the River and makes a Torrent. Why do you think true prophets are so dangerous? Because with *foreknowledge*, they can break the River to their whim – and potentially destroy us all. I am trying to save us all.”

The Dark Lord’s eyes narrowed. “What do you know, Rookwood? What have you seen? You’ve used your little Time Twister more than one, haven’t you?”

The chill winds seemed to claw at Rookwood’s skin, and in a second, he knew what they were – the River was beckoning, trying to pull him away. “I travelled to the future once. I saw the death of magic. Twenty-five after you die, magic fails. And our world dies along with it. As you know, we both have a vested interest in keeping the world alive.” The winds grew harsher and harsher, enough that Rookwood could feel the rushing in his ears. “My Lord, I cannot remain much longer. You must do this. You must save us from the –”

His voice cut off abruptly as the River’s full force connected with Rookwood’s neck, severing blood vessels and nerves.

With a sickening snap, his head rolled free, leaving a gory splotch with each bounce.

The Dark Lord eyed the gristly corpse for a few seconds before speaking, almost to the air. “You both heard.”

Out of the shadows, two Disillusionment Charms were lifted. Two figures emerged. One was a woman, with shining black hair, heavily hooded eyes, and a disdainful smile. The other was a man, with thick blond hair, cold glinting eyes, and a sadistic grin. “We heard,” he whispered, in a voice that seemed to carry in the whole room.

“I believe his story,” the Dark Lord replied, not even deigning to look at his servants. “Trelawney must be killed. It is your job,” he turned to the blond man, “to handle it. Take your time – enjoy yourself.”

Barty Crouch Jr. bowed low with a smile. "I will. Thank you, my Lord."

"You," the Dark Lord turned to the woman, "have a different job. Deal with Severus Snape. Preferably have it that he does not leave Spinner's End alive."

"He doesn't live there anymore," Bellatrix Lestrange replied. "He left after his filthy Muggle father killed the whore that was his mother. He's living somewhere in Hogsmeade right now."

"Three houses left of the Hog's Head," Crouch remarked. "I was there with Lucius and Rosier last Thursday."

"Good. You're free to go."

"With respect, my Lord, what will you be doing?"

"I, Bellatrix, will be perusing this fascinating book on blood magic you recovered from Norway for me," the Dark Lord said, his long fingers stroking the spine of the heavy volume. "There might be a way, I've discovered, to eliminate the scourge of Mudbloods forever – improve their lot and subsequently remove the Muggle taint."

"I wish you luck with that, then, master," Crouch said with an impressed nod as he vanished into the shadows. Bellatrix turned to leave, but the Dark Lord called her back.

"Yes, Master?"

"I want you to go to Spinner's End, anyway."

"But only Snape's good-for-nothing Muggle father is there."

"I know that," the Dark Lord said lightly. "Kill him too."

The evil smile grew on Bellatrix's face. "With pleasure, my Lord." And with that, she vanished into the shadows, leaving the Dark Lord in the darkness.

Meanwhile, in the shadows of the forest, the Time Twister faded away, vanishing as if it had never been.

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"And so the breach has formed. You realize what will happen now, don't you?"

"Of course I do, Croaker. It's exactly what we needed to happen."

"I don't agree with you on this – we don't have the right to do this."

"We have the power, and we aren't harming anybody –"

"That they know of."

"The fact remains the same, Croaker! You were the one who led me to this darkness, who gave me the oulenkeyne. I have a right to save magic in our world, don't I?"

"You are destroying lives, Garren. Some irreparably."

"It's a price we must pay. The River's been broken. It's his responsibility to fix it."

"Do you think he'll rise to the occasion?"

"Of course not, but that's what we're here for. We're his guides to the other world. He must be saved... somehow."

There was a pause, and then, "You know, she'll come as well."

"Who's 'she'?"

"You know. The one who's not supposed to exist."

"Ah. The one who breaks the balance."

"Bad terminology, Garren. There is no balance here."

"Regardless of terminology, she needs to break the balance. She needs us for that."

"And how do you suppose you can get her here?"

"We must rip the veil."

"Absolutely not."

"It's been torn before."

"And the River breakage will nearly destroy us all! You weren't there."

"Nor were you."

"The fact remains the same! You can't rip the veil. Are you prepared for the fallout of such a cataclysm?"

"I don't think anybody will be, and that'll be her job – to fix what we do. To stitch the veil back together. To break the keystone."

"She can't do that."

"Of course she can. Why else do you think she's coming?"

"I'm not referring to her capacity, I'm referring to her motive. She won't do it."

"She has no choice."

"And you've always underestimated free will. Fine, but you know we'll have to send him through."

"Of course we will. He'll be the only one who won't likely be obliterated upon impact."

A cold voice echoed in the darkness. "Are you two quite ready yet?"

"He's pushy."

"The newly dead always are."

"Shut up. If you're sending me back, do it now."

There was a flash of grey light and a strange whistle, but soon everything returned to blackness.

“You think this will work?”

“Of course it will. It doesn’t look like it yet, but it will.”

“And so what do you see now when you peer forward?”

A pause, and then, “The same thing I always see. Obliteration. Total, and final.”

Chapter 2

The day had come – finally – but for him, it hadn't been too early.

It had been a bitter argument to convince his father to let him leave, but he had prevailed after a few hours of bitter debate and harsh words. The next day, he was loading his trunk with any objects he considered valuable – surprisingly few, given his relative wealth – and heaving it down the main stairwell of the manor.

He didn't really know what came into him that he made the decision to move out of his comfortable home. Maybe it was the memories seared into his mind, of the people he had been forced to torture, to imprison, in what was once his home. Maybe it was the charred bloodstains that couldn't be removed from the carpets and would always be a stark reminder of his family's guilt. He wasn't sure, really – but he had stopped caring *why* a long time ago. For him, it simply felt the right thing to do – and for once, he was going to act on what *he* wanted to do, not what was expected of him.

Levitating his trunk with a quick flick of his wand, he lowered it carefully down to the floor of the main foyer. He cast a lasting glance over his former home, noting the new, much smaller, chandelier in the main hall. His thin lips curved with a thin smile – he remembered when that chandelier had come crashing down.

Out of a side room a figure appeared. Tall, blonde, and wearing well-tailored robes, she looked at her son with despair and some degree of... pride? He was stunned. That was the last thing he expected to be seeing on her face. Anger, hatred, disgust, disappointment, where were all of those emotions?

He also wondered, briefly, where his father was.

"You're ready to leave, now?" the woman asked, pulling on a cloak from a silver hook on the wall.

"I am. Where's my father?"

"Do you actually want to see him?"

Stupid question, Mother, he thought acidly. “Of course I do. He’s my father. Despite everything, we’re blood, and we can’t forget that.”

She winced, and the young man silently swore. *Why did I have to bring blood up?* he thought furiously. *That’s part of what landed us in this predicament!*

“Where do you plan to go?”

The young man pulled his simple cloak off the hook next to his mother’s. “Gringotts first, to solidify all my accounts and investments, especially the new ones. The Aurors have been investigating all of our transactions, as you well know. I don’t want any more problems with the fact that I actually have money of my own. They’re already trying to confiscate the Lestranges’ vault.”

“It’ll never work –”

“Don’t be so sure,” the young man interrupted, his voice icy cold. “The Aurors have been granted more and more powers by the Minister, and it will only be a matter of time before financial legislation is passed.”

His mother shook her head. “Gringotts will never allow it. The goblins were enraged enough with the Dark Lord’s interference.”

“I’m not saying the goblins are going to *like* or tolerate it,” the young man growled testily, “but that the Ministry will bring in these measures. The noose is tightening, Mother. It will only be a matter of time.”

His mother ignored the subtle jibe, but he knew that she saw the subtle implications: *they will be coming after you and Father. Be prepared for it.*

She shook her head. “I still don’t understand why you want to leave. Where did your father and I go wrong?”

His eyes widened incredulously. “You’re kidding me, right? You don’t think serving the Dark Lord and forcing me to serve him wasn’t enough? I’m done, Mother. I want out – I want to live a life where my survival is *guaranteed*, not granted on a whim. Besides, *he* won’t

mind if I leave. Hell, maybe he'll actually begin to trust me. Merlin knows I could use more trust in this world."

Almost on cue, there was a hammering on the door, an impatient knock. He sighed. "I'll get it."

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The young woman strode up the garden path with a casual elegance brought upon by confidence. A few people had stared at her as she sauntered up the street towards the manor. Thick, naturally black hair, freshly combed and freely hanging midway down her back, thick bangs that nearly concealed – but not entirely – her glinting ice-blue eyes. Less than a week ago, her face had been hollowed and sallow, but now it was full and healthy, filled with life. She wore a tight black short-sleeve shirt with comfortable black jeans – yet not too tight to make sudden moves difficult. She wore a rather long black leather jacket with a peculiar wooden rod sticking casually out of one pocket. The jacket served multiple purposes – both to protect her from the rain and to conceal the twin miniaturized submachine guns holstered on both her hips. *Two Uzis tend to make folk feel uncomfortable*, she thought with a smirk. Calf-length black leather boots and a black cap tilted jauntily over one eye completed the rather peculiar outfit.

She considered it quite stylish, and had indeed attracted some smiles from a couple of males outside a café. *It is certainly better than the majority of my kind will do*, she thought with another smirk. After over seven years of living among people who didn't utilize magic for her everyday life, she was far more adept than most in dressing like a Muggle with some degree of style and class.

Less than a week ago, she would never have dreamed of living a normal life, but now she was free. People knew who she was, and she was not concealed behind the shadows of anonymity any more. She was proud of her heritage – well, *most* of it – and for one of the first times in her life, she was happy. Things were finally starting to turn around.

Reaching the primary doors of the manor, she gave a quick, impatient knock. She didn't exactly have all day – she needed to meet with Minister of Magic Kingsley Shacklebolt in a few hours about turning in

the rest of her criminal contacts and possibly - *possibly* - getting a real job.

There was hurried footsteps outside the door, and it was flung open, to reveal a pale, pointed face, with thick white-blonde hair and ice-blue eyes.

They regarded each other for a few seconds. She smiled sweetly. "Hello."

The door slammed in her face. She rolled her eyes. *He always forgets to realize I have a key*, she thought with a sigh as she pulled out a brass key and inserted it carefully into the lock.

But before she could turn the key, the door opened again, revealing a blonde-haired woman, who didn't look surprised to see her visitor.

She didn't especially look pleased either, but the visitor immediately discounted that.

"Nicci Snape," the blonde woman noted without expression. "I didn't expect you to come so soon."

"You ought to know better than that, Narcissa," Nicci said lightly as she let herself into the foyer. "You made a bargain with my brother, and I'm here to make sure you fulfill your end." Her eyes landed on the young man standing sullenly in the corner. "Your son doesn't seem to accept that."

"Draco's still not convinced you're not going to steal his inheritance and his money," Narcissa Malfoy replied with a grimace, closing the door behind Nicci. "Plus, I don't think he likes you."

"And vice-versa," Nicci noted, her voice abruptly cold. "Is my father home?"

Narcissa paled a little bit. "Ah, I'm not sure, I'll have to —"

"Narcissa, please. I haven't talked to him since the battle, and I want to try and mend the breach that's between us. And I *promise* to be

civil.” She gave a sardonic smile that only caused Narcissa to narrow her eyes.

“He’s in the drawing room, filling out forms. Be quick, please – he’s extremely busy.”

“Oh I’m sure he is, but not too busy to see his daughter that he neglected for over twenty-four years,” Nicci remarked, shoving past an anxious Narcissa to view her father at his desk.

The years had not been kind to him, she noted with a degree of surprise. Azkaban had stolen the health from his face and hollowed his eyes, leaving him gaunt. The subsequent year of terror had left him nearly a shadow of his former self. His appearance still maintained some vestige of dignity, as his well-tailored clothes and newly trimmed hair suggested. Despite herself, Nicci noted how much she was like her father. She had the ice-blue Malfoy eyes, the physical beauty, and the cold cunning that epitomized the family.

It was from her mother’s side, though, that she inherited her sarcasm, her utter disrespect for authority, her ability to lie easily, and her iron determination to succeed.

Still, Nicci knew that pure ancestry did not make a person. She had learned values and tolerance from the Muggles who raised her, and their loss had left a void in her heart that still had not totally healed. *A pity the majority of my morals went out through the same void*, she thought with some sorrow. Living as a nameless Muggle criminal who lived everyday on the wrong side of the law had done much to harden her to the ways of the world and destroy her morals, and it had only been recently that she had begun to rebuild her life. Already, she could feel the effects – she felt invigorated, stronger, *happy*. In comparison, the man who stood across from her looked drained, as if the vitality had been leached from his veins.

His eyes widened as he saw her outfit. “By the Dark Lord’s snake, *what* are you *wearing*?”

“It’s called Muggle clothes,” Nicci replied easily. “Very comfortable and fitting to my style. Also relatively cheap. Helps me blend in.”

“When you’re out, Narcissa is going to use some of your money to get you some decent robes, fitting of your station,” her father muttered.

Nicci rolled her eyes. “Father – Lucius – I’m comfortable where I am. I don’t want *anything* from you besides what you promised. Can’t you realize that?”

“No,” Lucius Malfoy answered flatly, “because you have a reputation as a consummate liar, and I can’t trust half the words that come out of your mouth.”

Nicci’s smile vanished, and she approached the desk to look her father in the eyes. Ice-blue met ice-blue. “Look,” she said tiredly, “we grew up in different households, yet we’ve lived remarkably similar lives. We both descended into darkness, and lost nearly everything. And we both did it of our free will. Like father, like daughter. But we’ve both been given a second chance. You know Potter plans to speak on your behalf before the courts?”

“It won’t be enough,” Lucius said quietly. “Despite his newfound prominence as the Defeater of the Dark Lord, he doesn’t have enough power to remove a lifetime of sinning.”

“You’d be surprised what that boy can do when he’s determined,” Nicci muttered darkly. She had spent a few days at Harry Potter’s house at Number 12, Grimmauld Place, and his latest outrageous scheme nearly had her in tears laughing. Yet the way he was going, it was likely going to *work*.

“Why are you here, Nicci?” Lucius asked abruptly. “This place is not comfortable for you – never has – and furthermore, you arrive on the very same day my son is leaving. Why? What’s the coincidence here?”

Nicci took a deep breath. “Look, I doubt I can ever truly forgive you for a lifetime of neglect – some wounds do indeed run too deep. But I’m not here to forgive you anyway – I’m here to thank you.”

Lucius let out a harsh bark of laughter. “I don’t think I deserve any thanks either, my daughter.”

"I think you do, and you should accept them while I'm still offering," Nicci said, her voice suggesting an ultimatum. "Despite the fact that you wouldn't take me in and chose to cover up your illegitimate relationship with my mother Eileen Prince - which raised enough eyebrows as it was - you did two good things for me: you gave me an inheritance of some kind, more than you would typically ever give if you didn't care, and you gave me to two people who were some of the best parents I ever knew." She stretched out her hand, first pulling off the tight black leather gloves she typically wore. "Will you accept my thanks?"

Lucius stared at her hand for several long seconds, and Nicci held her breath. Finally, his hand shaking with nervousness and disbelief, he took Nicci's and shook it. "Nicci, you have no idea how sorry I am."

"Trust me, I do," Nicci said warmly, "but the fact you were willing to take my hand proves one thing – you're willing to come back. You aren't damned, Lucius. It isn't all over."

Lucius let go and finally grinned slightly. Even that very action seemed to bring some life back to his gaunt features. "You should go. Narcissa's waiting for you."

"Of course," Nicci said, sliding her gloves back on and joining the blonde woman at the door. She nearly took a step out, but she turned back to Lucius and called, "Good luck with your case, Father."

Lucius smiled with determination, one of the first smiles to grace in his face in a long time. "You've given me all of the confidence I need, Nicci. Thank *you*."

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Hermione Granger didn't get surprised very often – but Harry's newest plan went beyond the pale.

"Harry Potter," she began cautiously. "I don't consider myself a source on all magic, but even from what I've learned, I don't think what you're planning is even *possible*. Where could you have gotten such an utterly deranged idea?"

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Are you saying that you don't think it is possible?"

"It's not," Ron noted flatly. "I don't even agree much with your motives for doing so, but this plan is *crazy*, Harry. Magic just doesn't operate that way."

Harry sighed with frustration as he leaned back in his chair in the freshly cleaned kitchen of Grimmauld Place. Kreacher had done an excellent job making sure the place was sanitary during Harry's long absence. Now, after finishing a platter of sandwiches and a flagon of pumpkin juice, Harry had outlined his newest plan to his skeptical friends.

"So, let me just get this straight," Hermione said cautiously. "You want to take the Elder Wand and store it in a place where nobody can find it."

Harry sighed. "There's nothing wrong with that, I assume?"

Ron seemed ready to interject, but Hermione shook her head. "Of course there's nothing wrong with that intention, but there are easier ways to do it than what you're talking about! You want to store it in the *past*?"

"Yes. I'm talking about using a Time-Turner, going far enough back in time to a secluded area where nobody will find it, and leaving it there. We just can't trust that the Elder Wand will be safe in Dumbledore's tomb - it's been broken into before." Harry looked defiantly at Hermione, just waiting for her to raise an objection.

"And where do you plan to hide the Elder Wand, then?" Ron asked, ignoring Hermione's imminent protests.

Harry was ready for this question. "Inside the foundations of the Riddle House or lower. I've seen it enough times in my dreams that I can get there and hide it well. Nobody will have a chance to find it if it's buried under the weight of hundreds of years of dirt."

“He’s got a point, Hermione,” Ron noted quietly. “Despite the fact that / think Harry should hold onto the blasted thing, it seems the only thing we *can* do.”

Hermione looked ready to explode with frustration. “Time-travel doesn’t work like that, Harry! You can’t just induce a paradox into the world without changing the time-stream. What if anybody sees you? You could bend the entire River of Time just by your presence!”

“But nothing happened when you went to your classes in third year using the Time-Turner. Hell, without it, Sirius would have been worse than dead!”

“Still, the fact remains is that *we don’t have a Time-Turner!*” Hermione snapped. “How are we supposed to go back in time without that device? I know that I can’t build one – only the Unspeakables in the Department of Mysteries can do that, according to rumor. And you know if you try to go through official channels, they won’t let you get one for your purpose. There is too many who want that wand.”

“I *do* have friends in the Ministry,” Harry pointed out. “Kingsley’s there and he’ll give me enough freedom if I explain my case well.”

“But you have enemies there as well!” Hermione replied hotly. “Don’t you remember what was in the *Daily Prophet* less than a week ago? Rookwood is still out there – he somehow got free and just vanished into thin air!”

“I’m fairly certain that Rookwood wouldn’t really do anything, Hermione,” Ron said with a frown. “He doesn’t seem to be the kind to take any sort of dangerous action against Harry.”

“Just because he *hasn’t* doesn’t mean he *can’t*, Ronald!” Hermione shot back. “He was at the Ministry in our fifth year, remember? He was one of the Death Eaters there! Don’t you remember that, Harry...? Harry?”

She only could stare at her friend, who had gone deathly pale. “Rookwood... good God, why didn’t I see it before?”

“Harry, you’re not making any sense,” Ron stated flatly, a smile twitching at the sides of his mouth. “What about Rookwood?”

Harry abruptly stood. “Hermione, can you go get Ginny? We need to get to the Ministry, and I need her with me for this.”

“Harry, this is the middle of the business day! You can’t just go into the Ministry at this time. There are people working!”

“Watch me,” Harry snapped back defiantly as he picked up his cloak lying on the edge of the table. “Can you go get her for me?”

“No need,” a voice came from the door as a red-headed girl entered the kitchen. “I heard Hermione *shouting*, so I came down to investigate.”

Ron went red. “It wasn’t as if she was yelling at me!”

Ginny smiled. “I know that, but *somebody* has to look after you while Harry’s off saving the world. So what’s the problem now?” she asked, turning to Harry, who was picking up both the Elder Wand and his own, newly repaired wand.

“Rookwood. He was at Hogwarts during the Battle, and was captured, but he escaped.”

“I know,” Ginny said impatiently. “I started reading the *Prophet* after the Ministry got the presses back from Voldemort. He probably went and hid in the darkness somewhere.”

“And where else would it be easy for him to hide but *the Department of Mysteries*?” Harry growled, his patience stretching thin. “He was an Unspeakable – probably knew the entire place from top to bottom. That gave him a huge amount of power and knowledge about the Department, not to mention plenty of magical secrets that the Ministry could have kept secret. When he escaped, he could have Apparated to the Department of Mysteries and hid while all the Aurors were at Hogwarts! It would have been easy for him – not to mention devilishly clever.”

Ron scratched his head even as he picked up his cloak. "But why would he bother going there? What could he gain by going there than from going into hiding?"

"A place to hide," Harry replied grimly, "accompanied with a load of magical secrets I don't feel comfortable with Death Eaters having."

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It had indeed been a long time since Nicci had seen the white marble colonnade of Gringotts, but she didn't feel uncomfortable looking up at the building and smiling widely. *For once, I actually HAVE something in there*, she thought sardonically. Looking down at the tiny key she held, she noted the number engraved on it – 1402.

"Oh come on, you yourself said you don't have any time," Narcissa huffed impatiently and with a few waves of her hand, she chivied Nicci and Draco through the engraved doors. Nicci looked towards one of the available goblins on the high tables, but Narcissa guided her towards a heavy oaken door. "We'll deal with my private accountant – he'll take us down to the vaults with one of the goblins." She rapped three times on the door before hearing a voice bellow, "Come in!"

Narcissa opened the door to see the well-furnished paneled office of her accountant. Her lips turned upwards with the hint of a smile. "Roderick Welmon, it's a pleasure to see you still alive. I heard the Dark Lord was particularly thorough when he went on his killing spree in the bank."

The man rose to his feet and brushed his thinning brown-grey hair away from his eyes. He smiled widely, revealing perfect teeth. He was well-built, looking much stronger than Nicci expected an accountant to look. His liquid brown eyes danced as they darted around the room, and his thin yellow spectacles were quickly tucked away into a pocket of his tailored waistcoat. "Narcissa! It's been a long time!" He embraced her with enthusiasm (which Narcissa awkwardly returned with a bit of a pat on the back), and then turned to Draco and Nicci, standing behind her.

“And this must be Draco and... *ah*.” He suddenly dipped into a deep bow. “It’s a great pleasure to finally meet you, Miss Snape.”

Narcissa’s eyes narrowed. “How did you –”

“I have multiple clients, Narcissa. Fortunately for you, Severus Snape was also a client – and given your *unique* relationship to Miss Nicci Snape and her financial status, you have a right to hear about Mr. Snape’s will – of which Miss Snape here is a major beneficiary... or should I say, *the* major beneficiary.”

Nicci flushed. She had barely known Severus Snape – he had been a new professor when she had been at Hogwarts, with a vindictive hatred towards the majority of the students, who he viewed as mindless nincompoops. He tended to favour his own house, but even when Nicci was at Hogwarts, she had always had perceived a certain distance between the two of them – a distance that she knew that the shrewd professor had engineered.

But then Nicci had left Hogwarts and orchestrated the shipment of luhix to London, to sell to the Death Eaters – and her contact had been Severus. He knew her secrets, and had been responsible for saving her life and her sanity on numerous occasions, not to mention giving her back her identity. It had only been recently that he had given Nicci the ultimate secret – that he was her brother, on the Prince side of her family.

Knowing that she was perhaps one of the most hunted people in England after Harry Potter and his friends (after all, it was no conclusive to long life to have ruined the schemes of Bellatrix Lestrange and Antonin Dolohov), Severus had orchestrated her concealment – a concealment that broke down when he was slain by the Dark Lord’s snake. Nicci had heard that she might be the beneficiary of her brother’s will, but she couldn’t have imagined that she was the *sole* beneficiary.

Narcissa didn’t appear to realize either, but she didn’t seem to care as much. “That’s only one reason why I came here, Welmon. The original arrangement was to discuss Draco’s vaults.”

“Understandable,” the accountant countered, “but not exactly pertinent or immediate, Mrs. Malfoy. I needed to speak to Miss Snape anyway on the matter of Mr. Severus Snape’s will, and officially unlock her vaults, which of course you need to be here for. This allows me to handle both cases at the same time – and, for continuity’s sake, I’d like to deal with Miss Snape’s first.”

Narcissa’s eyes narrowed. “You’re not going to be convinced otherwise on this issue, are you?”

Welmon gave a wide, toothy smile. “It’s never a good idea to argue with the bank, Narcissa.”

Narcissa threw up her hands with disgust. “Fine then. *Miss Snape*, sit down. This will take some time, likely. I’d like to see Severus’ logic behind it.”

Nicci threw her father’s wife a scathing look before taking a seat. Welmon seemed not to notice the scowls on his clients’ faces as he withdrew a heavy scroll and cleared his throat.

“This reading of the final will and testament by Professor and Headmaster Severus Tobias Snape, conducted by Gringotts Chartered Accountant Roderick Simon Welmon, takes place on May 9th, 1998, in front of all beneficiaries of said final will and testament, with the knowledge that all articles specified in such document have been officially condoned by Severus Tobias Snape and the Ministry of Magic. The document, as follows, goes as forth –”

“There’s a problem here,” Draco interrupted sharply. “How on earth has Snape’s will been ratified by the Ministry? It takes a *month* approximately for wizarding wills to be examined – and given his former Death Eater status, I assume that they would have made it a primary article to examine his in detail!”

Welmon grimaced. “Plenty of Death Eaters and other combatants perished in combat at Hogwarts during the Battle. Several departments of both Ministry officials and Gringotts employees have been pulled off their typical jobs to examine documents in teams – else the paperwork would carry on for years.”

"It sounds as if you were on one of those teams," Draco persisted.

"I was, as a matter of fact, examining this very document," Welmon replied stiffly. "If I might continue –" He cleared his throat again and began reading in an official-sounding tone. " 'I, Professor and Headmaster Severus Snape, hereby leave all assets, physical, temporal, and magical, to my younger sister, Nicci Tara Snape, in the event of my passing. All financial proceeds from my accounts and overseas investments are to be transferred immediately to the account of Nicci Tara Snape, Vault Number 1402, along with all appropriate documentation of all assets and articles. Furthermore, I hereby condone the Ministry to compel one Narcissa Malfoy to redirect all funds sealed away in Malfoy Vault #15, sealed by order of Narcissa Malfoy approximately twenty-four years ago, as pertaining to the Unbreakable Vow she swore, which can be confirmed with the usage of Priori Incantatem on the wand of one Nymphadora Tonks.' "

Narcissa flushed deeply. "That's... that's utterly ridiculous! I was going to redirect the funds *anyway* - how dare he just *order* me to do so anyway? Besides, even if I wasn't planning on unsealing the vault and releasing the money, how can something like an Unbreakable Vow allow him such leeway in his demands? His death implies the breakage of the Vow!"

Welmon winced at Narcissa's anger, knowing well his answer wasn't good. "He found the loophole, Narcissa. In terms of legality and documentation such as a final will and testament, you are *technically* bound by the terms of an Unbreakable Vow, and even though it is a bit of a stretch to have such terms apply to other people, it was a loophole Mr. Snape was able to exploit."

"That's blackmail," Draco hissed. "It's unbecoming."

"Avoid courses in Magical Law, then, Master Malfoy," Welmon replied tersely as he cleared his throat again. " 'Furthermore, I compel the Department of Magical Property Management to release the property of the Prince family to Nicci Tara Snape, which I was denied due to blood status, and all stored assets and vaults relating to such property-' "

Narcissa could hardly speak for rage. “How can he do this? He can't *compel* the Department of Magical Property Management to do anything! He has absolutely no authority, and furthermore – and I'm sorry for the slight, Nicci, but it's true – she is technically not the Prince heir! She's illegitimate!”

Welmon winced again even as Nicci threw her father's wife a baleful glare. “*Technically*, actually, according to the final will and testament of the Prince family, Miss Snape inherits *everything*. Eileen Snape nullified her inheritance when she married the Muggle Tobias Snape, and subsequently Severus Snape, as a half-blood, could receive none of the property. However, such wills make allowances for skipped generations, and as Nicci Snape *is* a pureblood – both on the Malfoy side and the Prince side, she is entitled the entire Prince estate, all assets tied to it, all investments, and all magical artifacts connected to such estate –”

“Fine – I get the picture,” Narcissa snarled. “Is there anything else? Anyone else dear Snape is ‘compelling?’ The bastard is trying to get us all, even after he's *dead*!”

Nicci personally thought that her brother's will had been a master stroke of wit and legal maneuvering, but she had no desire to anger Narcissa any further, so she kept her mouth shut. Plus, the accountant had arrived at the last article on the will.

“ ‘Finally, I order the compulsion of the Department of Mysteries to release the ‘Orb of Dreams’, otherwise known as an *oulenkeyne* and give it posthaste to Nicci Tara Snape upon her arrival at the Ministry of Magic on...” Welmon's voice vanished and his face drained of color. He took a deep breath to steady himself, and then he continued, speaking the words as if he could not believe them. “...On May 9th, 1998.”

Nicci's went pale, and her wand was in her hand in a second, her other resting on the butt of one of her Uzis. “How could Severus *possibly* predict what is happening now? And *why* didn't you mention this from the very beginning?”

“Miss Snape, I know this is going to sound very, *very* bad,” Welmon began, gesturing weakly at the paper in his hand, “but... but this

paper never noted any specific date when we examined it. The ink is in a different color – a bluish shade instead of the regular black. The will *has* been ratified – because it's impossible to write on one once it has – but I... I can't explain this."

"Enough!" Narcissa snarled, her patience clearly out as she swiped the will from the lawyer's hand and held it to the light. "So you were incompetent – nothing to be surprised there – but I can't see how..." She suddenly dropped the will and stepped back two steps, looking at words that seemed to be oozing out of the parchment *on their own accord*.

Mind over matter. Take three and flee. The River has split. It is coming. Mind over matter... until it all ends.

Nicci could only stare in horrified fascination as she saw the letters on the will. Abruptly, she picked up the parchment and touched the ink lightly with the side of her glove.

It was still wet.

Nicci stood suddenly, fury blazing on her face. "Welmon, I don't know how you messed this up, but your failure here is incredible. What magic did you summon to create this? *What magic?*"

"He hasn't touched his wand," Draco noted quietly, his voice tight with a contained fear. "He's clean. The words just... came out of the paper."

"Could it be a Horcrux of some sort?" Narcissa muttered to herself, carefully looking at the paper in Nicci's hand. "Could *Severus* have made a Horcrux?"

"It's not a Horcrux – it's a message," Nicci whispered to herself as she saw the blue ink oozing down the page. "Somehow - *somehow* - Severus has managed to contact me beyond the grave. Something is coming... and he's trying to warn me."

"That's not possible," Welmon whispered.

“Despite the possibilities, it might be that Nicci has to go to the Ministry later, but it does *not* involve our business,” Narcissa said in a raised voice, addressing Welmon again, who was desperately trying to salvage his academic composure. “We have business, Roderick, and I don’t want to have to go to the Ministry to do it. I need you to redirect a certain amount of funds to my son’s vault immediately, noted in exacting quantities on this paper.”

Welmon looked at the paper lightly and sighed heavily. “The fact of the matter is... I can’t, Mrs. Malfoy.”

“And why *can’t* you, Mr. Welmon?” Narcissa asked dangerously. “Isn’t this your *job*?”

“I can’t overrule the Ministry of Magic, Mrs. Malfoy. By order of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, all account-transfers, withdrawals, or deposits to any accounts affiliated with the Malfoy family have been frozen until the Wizengamot has absolved the Malfoy family of any illegal behavior –”

The accountant’s voice trailed off, but Nicci spoke up, exasperation plain in her tone. “Oh come *on*, Narcissa. Did you really expect something different?”

“I thought the Ministry would be above this – Shacklebolt didn’t even send us a notice of this!” Narcissa snapped.

Nicci, who had had several unpleasant experiences with Kingsley Shacklebolt – including the times when she had shot him in the shoulder and when he had tried to arrest her after the Battle of Hogwarts – wasn’t entirely surprised. “It’s probably happened to a number of families affiliated with Death Eaters,” she said calmly. “You can come with me to the Ministry and settle this out. I need to talk to Shacklebolt anyway.” She stuffed the will into her pocket and turned towards the door.

“So I guess this means I shouldn’t move out?” Draco growled. Nicci silently swore – the last person she felt like dealing with was the mewling Malfoy brat.

She turned on her heel to the youngest Malfoy. "Look, *Draco*, you can probably move out whenever you want – you'll just have to adjust to the lifestyle that comes along with it. If you can't deal with the loss of amenities... well, talking to somebody who has slummed it on the streets, I'd tell you to suck it up, but it's your choice after all."

Draco threw her a baleful stare, but before he could say something regrettable, Narcissa spoke up, her voice filled with chill malice. "Enough of this. All three of us will go to the Ministry *now*, and once these problems are handled, we'll return to Gringotts. Let's just go before I discover any more Ministry attempts against my family – I could say something...*unpleasant* if it came up," she added, clenching the muscles in her jaw.

Nicci put her hand to her mouth as she turned away, to conceal her chuckle. *Say something, Narcissa? It'll be more than that, if I wager anything. It'd likely be my responsibility to inform the Ministry of such a threat – they might not be prepared for the aftermath.*

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The Ministry was bustling with activity this day – dozens of officials were working on the dismantling of the massive statue that dominated the hall when the Dark Lord was in power. Set with two thrones supported by naked Muggles and emblazoned with the words 'MAGIC IS MIGHT', it now was a pile of rubble painstakingly being Vanished by a series of harassed navy-robed Magical Maintenance officials.

Harry only noted the statue's destruction with a passing glance. He needed to get to the Department of Mysteries and pry Rookwood out of his hiding place. He didn't care that it was broad daylight and that hundreds of wizards were likely at work – Rookwood could do incredible damage in the Department of Mysteries. Nobody knew what sort of Dark Magic was stored there. *And since Voldemort took over, he thought with a pang of horror, there are likely more Dark experiments and magic down there than ever. All the more reason to pry Rookwood out.*

“Harry,” Ron nudged his friend lightly, “it’s that Snape girl coming along from the Floo on the side – and, blimey, it looks like she has some unpleasant company!”

“That could potentially be an understatement,” Hermione growled as she grasped her wand sticking out of her jeans. Even despite the fact Harry was rather fond of Nicci Snape and her sardonically efficient manner, neither Hermione nor Ron liked her much at all. Surprisingly, Ginny had taken very well to the older woman, treating her like the cooler older sister she never had.

Harry saw Narcissa and Draco Malfoy behind Nicci, and despite his confidence that the Malfoys could do him no harm here, he still felt uneasy. Something about the cold fury on their faces made him feel that *something* had likely gone wrong.

Might as well say hello, he thought with a shrug as he called out to Nicci. “Miss Snape, over here! What brings you to the Ministry now? You weren’t supposed to be here for a few hours.”

“There were problems at Gringotts,” Nicci replied tersely as she reached Harry. “The Malfoy accounts were frozen, and Severus’ will was read – he left me his estate, the Prince estate, and some magic in the Department of Mysteries.”

The hair on the back of Harry’s neck stood up. *No way this is a coincidence*, he thought. “Department of Mysteries? What particular object did Snape leave you?”

“It’s called an ‘Orb of Dreams’, whatever that is,” Nicci replied quickly, before pulling a startled Harry over to the side. “*You* didn’t happen to have anything to do with the freezing of the Malfoy accounts, did you?”

Harry shook his head, bewildered. “I gave them a full pardon. I knew they would be charged in the Wizengamot, but I never condoned having their vaults frozen. Do you think Kingsley did it?”

“It doesn’t matter anyhow, because that’s not the business we need to handle first,” Nicci replied with a fierce whisper. “Why are *you* here, Potter? You weren’t supposed to show up until I met with the Minister.

Or are you still trying to find a way to activate your crazy time-travel plan?"

"It's worse than that, but I'll tell you later," he said as they approached the watchwizard's desk. They passed through registration quickly and entered the lift. After everyone had gotten in, Harry hammered the button for Level 9.

"No, no, no, we need to go to Level One," Narcissa said quickly, but Harry wasn't listening to her comments. He turned back to the two Malfoys.

"This is more important, Narcissa. It's a Death Eater problem, and you two might come in handy in negotiations – if it comes to that."

Nicci swore under her breath. "Which one got free, Potter?"

Harry was amazed. *How could she guess so fast?* "Augustus Rookwood, former member of the Department of Mysteries. We think he might be hiding in the shadowy corners of the Department – most of the offices down there are abandoned anyhow, given how well the Ministry purged the staff down there."

"True enough," Ron muttered. "If I remember correctly, Dad told me that Rookwood was the sole one in charge down in the Department of Mysteries before You-Know-Who fell the second time."

"And who knows what kind of Dark Magic that is down there, in Rookwood's sole possession?" Narcissa finished. "You're wasting your time, Potter. Rookwood's a coward. He didn't have the guts to support the Dark Lord openly, and thus he managed to hide for a considerable time. Only after Karkaroff turned him in did his involvement in the Death Eaters come out."

Nicci shook her head as they passed more and more levels, approaching the Department of Mysteries. "Rookwood's desperate. He's got nothing left to live for except a life in Azkaban. He's dangerous – he might do anything."

“And you can never devalue the power of an act of desperation,” Draco muttered to himself, but in the small elevator, his voice was audible. To his surprise, Harry nodded with agreement.

“You’re absolutely right. That’s why we have to get him out of there.”

The elevator shuddered to a halt, and before the voice even spoke, Harry, Narcissa, and Draco were off and down the dark corridor. Ron and Hermione slowly followed, leaving Ginny and Nicci in the elevator, who only got off the elevator at the last second.

“Nice outfit,” Ginny commented, noting Nicci’s flamboyantly Muggle tastes.

“Thank you,” Nicci replied, feeling slightly uncomfortable as she looked at the slim redhead. This was something she felt she had to say, although she had no inclination to – it would be awkward as hell. “Look, I want to make it blatantly clear that I have no *intentions* for Harry. I know you’re with him.”

“Not really, yet,” Ginny replied with a shrug. “It’s only coming back together, and it wasn’t easy being separated for the better part of a year.”

“Well, that’s good,” Nicci said with a degree of relief, but in the back of her thoughts, she wondered why she had even bothered. *One of Harry’s best friends is a girl, after all.*

“However,” Ginny added with a menacing edge in her voice, “if you *do* ever try anything, know that I will curse you into little twitching pieces so small you couldn’t find them with a Summoning Charm.”

Nicci laughed. “That’s the spirit,” she said, clapping Ginny on the shoulder as they ran down the dark corridor, towards the dark door.

Towards the encroaching silence. Towards the watching bleakness.

Towards the waiting doom.

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“A tad melodramatic, don’t you think? Having the words ooze out of the paper like that?”

“Don’t criticize my methods.”

“I have every right to criticize your methods, Garren! You’re a brutal bastard. You could have just sent apocalypse from the sky and that would have conveyed your message.”

“That would have caused collateral damage, Croaker.”

“And since when did you ever care?”

A pause resounded in the darkness, and then, almost grudgingly, “Good point.”

“I know. I thought of it – not you.”

“It needed to be done, and you would never have had the stomach to do it.”

“You’re wrong there. I have no qualms about sending a message – but the melodrama is intolerable. Who do you think you are, some bloody Muggle soap opera writer?”

There was a longer pause, before the harshly whispered response. “This is no soap opera, Croaker.”

“Then what do you call it?”

The whisper resounded in the darkness. “The darkest, bloodiest horror story that I’ve ever seen.”

There was a scoff. “It can’t be that bad.”

“Try looking straight at oblivion, and then tell me that.”

Another pause, then, “It’s going to be ugly, then.”

“Croaker, did you think I was lying?”

Chapter 3

The black door sat at the very end of the hallway, and seemed to almost absorb the light directed towards it. To Harry, it represented memories... very, very dark memories. Voldemort had attempted to lure him there, and had succeeded. Because of that lure, Harry had found out about the prophecy. Because of that lure, Sirius had died.

No wonder it feels like I'm retracing my footsteps by coming back here, Harry thought darkly as he approached the door and stretched out his hand. *But why does it feel so much like a trap?*

"Are you just going to stare at the door all day, Potter, or are you going to get on with this?" a sneering voice spoke up from directly behind him. Draco had come up behind him with a scathing look on his face. At that second, Harry noticed the hollowness to his features and the haunted look of his eyes. It was not natural for Draco to look like this, and they both knew it. It was a mask, a badly created one, and Harry knew that something had changed drastically with his former archenemy.

Maybe it has something to do with that Nicci girl, Harry thought with a sudden pang. It had only been a week ago when Draco had discovered that he really wasn't the oldest Malfoy heir – Nicci was. Even despite the fact that she had no interest in the family inheritance, Harry could still remember the look of sweaty terror on Draco's face when Narcissa had mentioned the possibility that Nicci might become the primary heir. *He's probably trying to make something of himself,* he thought with a twinge. *He's always walked in his father's shadow, but when his father went straight into hell, he discovered he needs his own life. It's probably that what's driving him now – the drive to be different.* Harry could sympathize with that – Ron had been struggling to do that for the past seventeen years.

Harry tensed, drawing his wand as he put his hand on the doorknob. "We should be prepared for anything. Rookwood probably knows we're here. Watch for tripwires –"

Narcissa rolled her eyes. “Who do you think you’re talking about, Harry Potter? This is Rookwood we’re talking about; he wouldn’t use Muggle tripwires!”

“We should be prepared for anything,” Nicci stated coldly, shoving past Narcissa. “With a Death Eater – especially one that’s been to the Department of Mysteries – we should expect Muggle traps *and* magical ones. Tripwires, electronics, symbols, glyphs of warding... plus any other tricks he might devise.”

“You sound like you know their tactics,” Hermione noted suspiciously.

Nicci rolled her eyes, while Ginny looked disgusted. “Of *course* I know their tactics, Granger, considering many of them they stole from me. I protected Warehouse 49 like a fortress, and they simply adopted what was there.”

“That didn’t stop you from breaking in.”

“Hermione, would you just lay off her for a while?” Ginny snapped angrily. “Nicci’s on our side, and you need to realize that like everyone else!”

“Stop arguing,” Harry tersely warned, angling his wand at the door. “We need to get this over with, before Rookwood finds us. Nicci, you’re in first. Ready?” The group nodded, and Nicci drew her wand and one of her Uzis. “Three... two... one... NOW!”

Harry heaved the door open, and Nicci was inside the room in a second, rolling along the circular wall with casual grace that seemed fluidly impossible. Harry was in next, pointing his wand towards the ice-blue glow in the center of the room –

He froze, stopping to look at the strange sight. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled. *Something’s not right...*

There was nothing inside the circular room. The torches and candles were gutted, and the only light came from a small glowing sphere, hovering about a meter off the ground. The light was chill, flickering, and blue – it gave no warmth.

Narcissa's eyes went wide. "That's... that's an *oulenkeyne*... it has to be. But how would it get here?"

Nicci moved forward, interested. If Severus had left it for her, she wanted to examine the device in closer detail.

To her disappointment and confusion, it didn't appear much. It was a roughly spherical ball, covered in riveted metal, abet badly. Small flickers of white-blue light emerged from the cracks or gaps in the rivets, and set a panorama of stars on the walls as the sphere slowly rotated. It was small – with a radius of roughly ten centimeters, as far as Harry could tell. Yet despite its rather nondescript appearance, something seemed... ominous about it. Something mysterious... something alien...

Something dangerous...

Harry turned to Narcissa abruptly. "You know something of these devices. How does it work, and why would it be here, of all places?"

Narcissa shook her head. "Lucius had one a long time ago, but he lost it in a mishap at the Manor. Draco's grandfather decided to use it and vanished for a short time. He later reappeared, infected with dragon pox, but he didn't have the *oulenkeyne* with him."

"So that's where Grandfather Abraxus went," Draco muttered. Narcissa glared at him before turning back to Harry.

"He never spoke of where the *oulenkeyne* took him, only that he was glad that it was gone. In any case, I have no idea why it is here."

"So it's a mode of transportation?" Nicci asked sharply. "Why would Severus leave me that, if he wanted me to go somewhere? Wouldn't a Portkey work just as well?"

"I can't be sure," Narcissa admitted, putting her hand through her long blonde hair. "Something doesn't seem right about it..."

Harry turned to Hermione. "Well? Have you read anything about these devices?"

Hermione raised her hands helplessly. "I would have recognized the entries. All I know is that they're called 'Orbs of Dreams', and that their title comes from an ancient dialect of magical writing lost about twelve centuries ago."

"Wonderful," Harry muttered, turning back to the device. He stepped a little closer and shielded his eyes from the blazing blue light coming from the cracks and holes of riveted metal. Hermione also stepped a little closer, to take a look, her eyebrows furrowed with concentration. It was rare that there was an article of magic that she'd never heard of."

Ron suddenly swore behind them as he peered down at the floor. Harry turned around, irritated at his concentration being broken.

"What?"

"It's Hermione," Ron gasped. "She has no shadow."

Harry looked at the floor, and, surely enough, there was no shadow there behind her. It was almost as if the light passed clearly through her... or that she didn't exist.

"That's just wrong," Ginny muttered, stepping closer to the orb. Draco slid closer as well, shielding his eyes from the light.

Ron also stepped closer, but Harry saw something very disturbing – Ron had no shadow too.

Hermione looked confused and appalled by her lack of a shadow. From the look on her face, Harry already guessed that she had jumped to a conclusion. "Harry... you know we're not vampires, right?"

"Of course I do," Harry replied, the thought not even crossing his mind. "You've been with me nearly constantly for months. I would have seen something before now."

"This doesn't make any sense..." Nicci muttered, but then she saw something strange – Ginny was staring at the *oulenkeyne*... almost as if she were entranced by the light.

“Ginny...” Harry began, his concerned eyes flicking to the girl he was in love with. “What are you...GINNY, NO!” He reached out and seized her arm stretching towards the orb, but it was too late – her fingers had already brushed the size of the riveted metal.

It sounded almost like a Muggle vacuum, the air crackling and twisting around the orb, space seeming to bend around the edges of its presence. Nicci and Draco, who were closer to Ginny, grabbed a hold of her cloak. Her eyes still had the same entranced look in them.

“Dear Merlin, Ginny,” Nicci whispered quietly. “What have you done?”

But no more words left her mouth, as the riveted metal slid back to reveal a dazzling white-blue light. This light did not flicker – it burned with a searing fire into their eyes. The air began to crackle with power and sheer twisting force.

Then Nicci felt Ginny shift under her grip... almost as if she was being pulled forward by some unnatural force towards the *oulenkeyne*...

Hermione’s wand was out in a second, and she screamed something, but Nicci couldn’t catch the words of the spell. Whatever it was, it hit the Orb of Dreams – and activated it.

Space bent towards the orb, towards the light. Space seemed to twist and revolve, almost as if it was being sucked down a black hole... almost as if space and time were dying...

There was a flash of searing blue light, and a single drawn-out scream, and all was still.

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Hermione was the first one to recover from the flash, but it was several seconds before her analytical mind broke through the magical shock. She stared wildly around the circular room, now nearly bereft of light.

She could only gasp in horror. The group of seven was now reduced to three. Four were gone, as if they had never even existed.

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"Well, I hope that was to your ideals, Garren. Despite all my compunctions against it..."

"Oh, stop your whining, Croaker. We succeeded here. We got them into the Infinite Corridors, just like we wanted."

"And what then? Do you think they'll make it through?"

There was no answer to that.

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Nicci felt herself hovering, almost drifting in space. She felt as if she was somehow suspended in the air – a situation she was definitely *not* fond of. Memories of Selwyn's House of Luck and the tortures she had gone through there immediately sprung to her mind, and she opened her eye with a noiseless gasp. She expected to see the room they had just left, or maybe even a white light.

What she saw instead astounded her – she had never seen anything like it. And she doubted she ever would in the future.

She hung suspended in a long, twisting hallway. The walls were midnight-blue stone, seemingly unearthly and ethereal, but Nicci knew that they would likely prove all too solid. Dozens of enameled doors adorned the walls and – to Nicci's astonishment and horror – the floors and ceilings as well. Indeed, it was difficult to tell what was floor and what was wall, so similar they were – and due to the fact that the floors seemed to twist as much as the walls.

And all throughout the hall blew a sort of wind, ruffling Nicci's jacket and tousling her hair. Nicci could barely feel the chill gust on her skin, but she knew it was there. It didn't seem like a current of air to her. Instead, it felt disturbing like a gust formed of thought, of memory, of perception. It was strange, and to Nicci, it felt terrifying alien.

Nicci? Nicci? Are you awake yet, Nicci?

The voice came from inside her head, but she recognized it instantly. Harry's anxious tones were unmistakable.

"I'm fine," Nicci muttered, but no voice came out of her mouth. She tried speaking again, but no sound came. Only the chill breeze seemed to make any sound, and it sounded more like the dull drone of idle conversation than anything else. Considering her options briefly, she projected her thoughts outwards. *Harry? Are you out there? Where are you? Where are we?*"

I haven't the slightest clue. If anything, we were hoping you could tell us. I mean, Ron and Hermione aren't here either...

Us? Nicci thought, confused. Almost as if it were a force of her own will, she slowly spun around to view three figures: Harry, Ginny, and – looking as though he didn't give a damn where he was, as long as he left quickly – Malfoy.

Ginny, despite her typically calm demeanor, looked anxious. *Do you have any idea where my brother is? Where's Ron?*

I'm as clueless as you are, girl, Nicci thought back quickly. *My only guess was since they didn't cast a shadow by the Orb, it didn't really... read them, if that's the right phrase. It could read us and sent us here.*

Wherever here actually is, Malfoy thought caustically. *Do we have any idea how to move around these corridors, or are we just going to hover here?*

I think you travel by thought in this place... whatever it is, Nicci thought musingly. *You ever heard about a place like this, dear brother?*

Malfoy started abruptly, and a sneer slid across his face. *And why would I know that?*

There was once one of these Orbs in the possession of your family, Nicci thought evenly. *I can only assume you might have some idea –*

It would not have been in my father's best interest to show me such things, Malfoy thought back with a grimace. *I can't help anybody here.*

Ginny looked crestfallen. *I'm sorry, Harry... Nicci. It was almost as if some voice inside the orb was... calling me forward.*

It's not your fault, Harry replied instantly, but Nicci wasn't so sure. She had heard about the Chamber of Secrets debacle from Harry while she stayed at Grimmauld Place, and it didn't exactly make her feel comfortable how easily Ginny had been possessed. *She needs to learn Occlumency, and learn it well,* the former dealer agent thought to herself.

None of that matters now, Nicci thought outwardly, her gaze sweeping the twisting halls. *We don't know where we are, but these halls must lead to something eventually.*

Then what do you suggest, Malfoy thought caustically, *just opening random doors and praying something happens?*

It's not a bad idea, Nicci countered sharply. *Perhaps, however, it might prove more prudent if we seek out an open door and just go inside it – I'm not sure opening any of these doors is entirely wise.*

What an understanding.

Shut up, Malfoy. I'm at least trying to volunteer ideas.

Stupid ones, unfortunately.

Do you have anything better, Ferret? Ginny snapped.

As a matter of fact, I do, Malfoy replied smugly. *From what I remember from Arithmancy, there's always some sort of pattern to be found in nature, and certain patterns are reoccurring. This place doesn't seem to have a pattern – which automatically makes me think that it's a human construct.*

What does that have anything to do with-

Let me finish, Weaslette, Malfoy snapped with a disdainful snarl at the furious girl. Nature is patterned – humans, on the other hand, like to create things that have no pattern and are arrhythmic to all reason. Given the twist of the corridors and the seemingly random behavior of everything, I'm inclined to believe that where we are has been built by a cognitive mind – abet a twisted one.

Nicci considered her brother's idea, and was surprised to find that it actually had a degree of sense. It was almost as if she was walking inside the mind of the most twisted architect that ever existed...

Suddenly, almost as if the knowledge had been delivered as a gift, she understood. *Malfoy's partially right. This is a construct – we're inside the Orb of Dreams.*

How can we be inside a tiny ball of riveted metal? Harry thought sardonically. *Nicci, that makes no sense.*

Nicci briefly considered throttling the young man, but she restrained herself. *The Orb is a gateway... a transporter to different realms. We were pulled inside – remember that? The construction of the blasted artifact and what Malfoy said makes it all make sense – we are in a sort of passageway carved of thought itself.*

Nicci, that's impossible.

This is magic. Since when is the impossible actually impossible these days?

It does make sense, in a weird, perverse sort of way, Ginny mused aloud. *So I guess the question is... how do we get out of here?*

We could try the doors, Nicci thought as she gestured towards the doors that covered walls, floors, and ceilings, *but I personally wouldn't recommend it.*

Do you have something to fear from a door, Nicci? Malfoy asked with a smirk.

No, but I have plenty to fear from what might be behind them, Nicci thought sharply. *If my hypothesis is correct – which I have no way of*

verifying, either way – then behind any of these doors could be thoughts or memories or dreams of the oulenkeyne, and who knows what those are? Could be as alien as this wind.

So what do you suggest then? Harry thought after a few seconds of silence.

Nicci's eyes widened with shock and some degree of incredulity. *You're coming to me for advice, Potter? I never would have seen the day.*

Don't talk to Harry that way, Ginny snarled, her thoughts laced with anger, *especially after all he's done for you!*

I'm not ungrateful for what he's done, Nicci retorted sharply. *Not in the slightest. I'm just a bit irritated that in the first damned week after I wake up, I'm stuck in some corridor composed of magic with people who trust their security to me. Isn't it the other way around, Mr. Potter? Should we be the ones trusting our security to you, given your vaunted status as 'Defeater of the Dark Lord'?*

I never asked for that title, Harry replied sharply.

But it's what you wanted, Nicci shot back, and she was darkly pleased to see the words wound the young man. *Take his ego down a notch,* she thought to herself. For despite her gratitude to Harry for his success in both helping clear her name and take down the Dark Lord, she couldn't stand his self-pity, his arrogance, his deliberate disrespect. Despite everything, she had inherited some of her brother's legendary dislike for Harry Potter.

Her eyes flickered to Ginny, whose face was flushed with fury. Nicci admired her spirit – there was something rebellious there that Nicci could understand, but there was also an innocence that had been lost long ago for the dealer agent. Even though Nicci respected Ginny's rather headstrong tendencies, she knew full well that the Weasley girl hadn't seen enough yet – hadn't seen the true realities of the war like Harry and Malfoy had. She hadn't experienced the hell that had hardened Nicci, gave her the icy stare of reality.

Yet despite all of that, Ginny liked Nicci, admired her – that was visible on her innocent face. Nicci found it a bit gratifying despite herself, but she also knew better. She knew the price that came with living her life, and the young redhead didn't seem the type to follow in Nicci's footsteps.

This is ridiculous, Malfoy snarled, breaking the long silence. *This is what neither of us wanted, but unlike anybody standing around here, I'm planning on doing something about it.* And without any hesitation, he pointed his wand down the corridor and slashed it violently, tracing a rune in fire in the air.

Nicci swore in her mind violently as she snapped her hand to her weapons to stop the imprudent Malfoy, but it was too late. The rune abruptly vanished as a door opened few steps down the hallway. And, with the same twisting of space that had erupted when the *oulenkeyne* had first activated, everything seemed to implode inward with a searing flash of blue-white light.

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There was a chuckle, and then... "Told you it wouldn't be that hard."

"I still don't like your methods, Garren, so don't patronize me if this part of your plan worked. Who was it?"

"The Malfoy boy, like I had predicted. All it took was a few rearrangements of the fabric of his little runic spell and the door was open. They are exactly where we wanted them to be."

"So, in other words, we got through the easy part."

The reply had lost all of its merriment. "You're right. We got them through the easy part. Now, as some would say, the fun begins."

"And did you ever classify this as fun, Garren?"

"You can't say it's not amusing to some degree, Croaker."

"What, watching you meddle with others' lives, with the River itself?"

"I never touched the River – I know the repercussions."

"I'm sorry – you just catapulted those four from one rock to another."

There was a slight pause, and then, "You know, I can never tell when you're using metaphor."

"In this time and place, Garren, there's no room for metaphor."

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Nicci was swearing the second she felt herself wake up. This time, she wasn't suspended in a corridor of blue light, but from the feeling in her back, lying against a cold stone wall.

She reached up to rub her eyes, only to feel the chill leather of her gloves against her face. It was wet and unpleasant, but Nicci didn't expect pleasantries – it didn't go with her profession.

She tried her nose, and to her surprise, it seemed to work fine. The immediate pungent odor of a alley dumpster caused her to wrinkle her nose in disgust – there had been an overflowing one next to her former apartment, and the stench coming from this particular one was remarkably similar.

Finally, when she felt confident that she could withstand the sight without retching, she opened her eyes. Her gaze fell upon a narrow, filthy alley, lined with grey bricks and littered with trash.

Feels just like home, she thought caustically as she shakily got to her feet. To her surprise, she wasn't nearly as dirty as she expected lying in a cold, dirty alley – it was almost as if she had appeared there moments before...

She quickly cast her gaze skyward to view an iron-grey sky. She grimaced – no doubt rain was coming. Rubbing her eyes again on her jacket sleeve and checking the positions of her weapons, she looked down the alley.

What she saw didn't really surprise her. Harry, Ginny, and Malfoy were all lying in the alley, and, upon closer inspection, all seemed to

be coming to. *Good – although I doubt the pretty-boy will enjoy waking up in a place like this.*

She didn't care to specify in her mind which pretty-boy she was referring to – in her mind, both of them were deserving of the description.

Unsurprisingly, when Malfoy looked wildly around the alley, he turned to Nicci with fury. "Why, by the Dark Lord's eyes, are we *here*?"

"Damned if I know – it appears that this is the place where the Orb deposited us," Nicci replied shortly, nudging Harry with her boot. "Get up, Potter – we need to go. It's going to start raining soon."

"Spectacular deduction," Malfoy muttered as Ginny got to her feet. Nicci gave him a killing glare.

"Where are we, anyway?" Harry asked, looking around with confusion. "I don't recognize this place. The air feels... wrong."

Nicci rolled her eyes. "It's called 'city air', Potter. Unpleasant and dirty – get used to it. It's not designed to be clean."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "So you've resumed usage of my surname again?"

She smiled sweetly in response. "Until we get on more friendly terms, then the answer is yes."

"Stop it, you two," Ginny said tiredly. "This place *feels* to me like Muggle London, but I haven't seen enough of the city to know for certain."

Malfoy, who had taken advantage of the argument to exit the alley, was now peering down the street. It was relatively abandoned – judging by the lighting, it was mid-afternoon, just before the evening rush-hour. He didn't know that, of course, and thus found the peculiar absence of most people rather strange. He remembered Muggle London being more crowded than this.

Nicci was out of the alley behind her brother. She cast her icy-blue gaze around as she set her hat back on her head. "Odd... I don't know this area that well, but I'm sure if we just find a subway station, we can –"

"I know where we are!" Harry interrupted excitedly. He pointed over towards a wall. "Right over there, just around that corner, is the telephone box which is the visitor's entrance to the Ministry of Magic – we can hop down there and pick up Ron and Hermione and get this all over with."

"Harry... wasn't it sunny when we went down there? And wasn't it later too?" Ginny asked warily, but Harry wasn't listening. Quickly crossing the street, with the others following closely behind, he rounded the corner to view –

Nothing. Just a cold black smudge where the telephone box used to be. There wasn't even any hole – it looked as if it had been patched with concrete years ago.

Harry stared around with confusion, and even Nicci looked concerned. Something didn't seem right. Where was the entrance? Did the Muggles finally take it into their heads to demolish it? Somehow, Nicci doubted it – something seemed disturbingly wrong with its absence.

"Harry... the box isn't here. Are you sure..."

"He's right for once, Weaslette," Malfoy muttered with shock. "I've been to the Ministry many times, several through the visitor's entrance. This is... was... the place."

"It's not over yet," Harry said grimly, moving over to where a few workmen were standing, fixing an electrical outlet on a nearby telephone pole. "Excuse me, sirs, but can I ask you a quick question?"

"So long as you make it quick," the first workman replied shortly. The big beefy man didn't even look up from his work. "We're kinda busy here, if you can't tell."

“Right, well, I was just wondering if you knew what happened to that old telephone box that used to be by that stone building over there...” Harry’s voice trailed off when the second workman spat in a puddle nearby. He had a long, thin face and bristly brown hair, but his eyes were cold and calculating, brimming with an intellect that didn’t seem right for a simple workman to have

“Damnit, Laramont, I thought nobody gave a damn about that old box!” he laughed in his grating voice. “Geez, it’s been years since somebody asked about that!”

“Years...” Harry froze, and Nicci felt a chill go down her spine – something was *definitely* wrong now. “Wait... how do you know about the box? Whatever happened to it?”

“Demolished it,” the first workman said shortly. “I was on that project too, Bodlan, you’re right! Damn, how long ago was that... nine, ten years ago, I think it was?”

Harry had gone pale as ice. His hand clenched around the handle of his wand. “And you never heard any objections to tearing it down?”

“Well, of *course* there were objections, but that’s to be expected. But the government overruled ‘em all and we tore the old box down. Damned good thing, too – that piece of crap was an eyesore like you wouldn’t have believed.” With that response, the first workman turned away. The second workman continued to watch Harry with his cold eyes for a few seconds longer, and Harry backed away quickly, thanking them for their time.

When he came back, he was shaking – with rage. “Something happened here, and those bastards know about it.”

“Cool it, Potter, you don’t know that,” Nicci snapped. “The last thing we want is you picking fights without the muscle to back it up. We heard everything they said and we know that you’re upset – for the life of me, I can’t figure out why - but there’s nothing we can do about it. We need to get to somewhere safe where we can coordinate things.”

“Malfoy Manor,” Malfoy said immediately. “Perfect place.”

“Not in your life,” Harry replied shortly. “Grimmauld Place – it’s the best spot. I assume you can all Apparate there?”

“I don’t know where it is, Potter, and I doubt my beloved sister is willing to take me on Side-Along – not that I’d want her to,” Malfoy added with a grimace. Once again, Nicci restrained her urge to punch him across his pointed jaw.

“Forget Apparition,” Ginny said sharply. “Besides, I don’t have a license.”

“Then we’ll hop on the subway and take Muggle transportation,” Nicci said with an air of finality. “If this is the former spot of the visitor’s entrance, then we’ll take the station just a few blocks down. It’ll be a learning experience for all of us.”

The group made it to the station without any trouble, and Nicci paid for their tickets – her pockets were stocked with Muggle money. However, the sleepy man at the pay station looked a bit queerly at her money before handing her the tickets.

“You should get some euros,” he muttered. “I’m taking your pounds ‘cause I’m old school, but some of the stations...”

“We’ll keep that in mind,” Nicci interrupted, shoving Harry and Malfoy through the barrier (Ginny had already gone through) and onto the nearest train.”

“What’s a ‘euro,’ Miss Snape?” Malfoy asked lightly, settling uncomfortably into the nearest deserted seat. The train car was nearly deserted, only occupied by a snoozing drunk in a corner seat.

“Damned if I know,” she admitted. “Probably some new Muggle currency – I’ll have to stop in at the bank and get some money traded in... I remember them talking about it a little bit, but every place I knew still took pounds.”

The train stopped, and the weary group got out at the station. Walking back out to the cloud-filled sky, Harry swore abruptly.

“Wrong stop... sorry,” he said, his face flushed with embarrassment. “I didn’t exactly remember which station it was.”

“Forget it,” Nicci said with a sigh. “Look, there’s a Muggle bank just down that street. I’ll stop over there and trade my currency – maybe get some extra cash, just in case we need to bunk out somewhere.”

“I’m not bunking out anywhere,” Malfoy muttered. Nicci pretended not to hear him as they crossed the road and approached the bank.

Harry abruptly stopped, his gaze fixed on the flashing screens in a shop window. A newscaster was speaking and gesticulating at the events on the screen.

“What’s so fascinating, Potter?” Malfoy asked conversationally, his gaze flicking towards the screen. “What are those things anyway?”

“They’re called ‘televisions.’ Muggles watch ‘em,” Nicci replied with disgust. “Dear God, you’re ignorant.”

“Harry, what’s wrong?” Ginny asked, ignoring the argument. Her eyes were only on Harry, whose hands were on the glass and shaking violently.

“No... no... no...” he whispered, as he stared at the screens. The newscaster was speaking about some American politics, and for the life of her, Nicci couldn’t figure out what his problem was.

Then her eyes fell on the date on the corner of the widescreen, and they widened with shock... and horror. *It’s impossible*, she thought wildly. *This can’t be happening. This can’t – it can’t – be happening...*

The date read, in white block letters: *Saturday, May 10th, 2008.*

“So this explains everything,” she murmured with rising horror. “We’ve come too far.”

“We’ve come,” Harry whispered, “into our own future.”

Chapter 4

Nicci felt like her world was plummeting out of control. For her, it seemed like only yesterday that she had been standing in the Great Hall at Hogwarts, finally free of her self-inflicted loss of identity. Only a day before that, she had sobbed over Nymphadora Tonks' dead body.

She didn't even have enough time to see her brother's funeral. Given he had been a Death Eater, his name wasn't exactly on the priority list, and his funeral had only been scheduled for three days yet.

And now she was ten years and a day into the future, in the Muggle world.

Draco was as pale as death, and he watched the television screens with a shocking intensity. If Nicci hadn't felt so shell-shocked, she would have thrown a jibe at his new 'reliance' on Muggle technology.

Ginny was taking deep breaths to the side, clutching the wall with one hand. It sounded as if she was trying to avoid hyperventilating. Her eyes were wide with terror – how much had they missed in being gone for ten years?

"Isn't there any way we can hear what this man's saying?" Draco finally snarled, turning away from the screens. "I can't hear very well through the window."

"Really, is that all you care about?" Ginny snapped, her flaming hair nearly crackling with spite. "We're in the future, and everyone we know could be dead and all you care about is some blasted *television*?"

"Ginny, stop it, now," Harry said, slowly gathering his calm. "We're here, and we're okay. It can't be that bad. Voldemort's dead – we all know that – and there's plenty that could have happened in ten years, you know that. Maybe the Ministry decided to relocate to a different spot, or they decided to rent a building –"

“Potter, shut up,” Nicci hissed, her eyes sweeping the crowd – she could see a few people staring. “Let’s get to a café or something – and you three need to change.”

They walked into a nearby coffee shop with a prominent green sign. Malfoy rolled his eyes.

“What’s your problem?” Nicci asked caustically.

“They called this place ‘Starbucks,’” he replied, chortling under his breath. “Honestly... how low can these Muggles get?”

They took a seat in a shadowy corner – thankfully, there wasn’t a lot of light in this café – and Nicci quickly bought them all bottles of water. Shoving the water bottles across the cheap table, she settled into the seat and peeled off her gloves.

Malfoy looked at the water bottles with distaste. “What’s this supposed to be?”

“Water. I don’t trust you with anything potent,” Nicci replied briskly. “We need to gather our facts and stop speculating about what we know and don’t know. The last thing we need is panic to get in the way. And *that* means that you might actually have to listen to my advice.”

“We just need to get back into the wizarding world –” Malfoy began, but Nicci threw him a baleful stare and cut him off with a sharp motion of his hand.

“That’s the *last* thing we want to do right now. I agree we need to get back to familiar territory, but it is not the smartest idea to just go blabbing about what we plan to do – and you have to remember we are in *regular* territory here – be careful with what you say.”

Malfoy looked mutinous, but Harry and Ginny were viewing Nicci’s arguments with some apprehension. *Phrase it right*, Nicci thought sardonically, *and I might even gain both pretty-boys on my side.*

“So what do you suggest then?” Ginny asked, taking a short drink from her water bottle.

Nicci was ready for this. “First, we sum up what we know. Fact: we are ten years into the future, but the world is still visibly recognizable. That rules out warfare or plague attacks upon the regular populace. Fact: we have seen no wizards walking the streets – at least not openly – but given the strange looks we’ve been given, wizards haven’t come into the open. We’ll need to remedy that in some manner, but that’s later. Fact: currency has changed slightly, and maintaining a steady flow of cash is vitally important for us – it gives us flexibility.” She lowered her voice. “Fact: the Ministry of Magic’s visitor entrance no longer exists, which can imply a variety of things. It could imply that the Ministry of Magic has simply closed their visitor entrance, or moved it. It could also imply that the Ministry of Magic has relocated to some other locale in the city. Worst case scenario is that the wizarding government as we know it no longer exists, or has been replaced with something that we know nothing about.”

“We have a serious lack of information,” Harry noted sharply. “Even with what we’ve seen, we don’t know much.”

“So now we have to prioritize,” Nicci replied with a nod, counting off the options she could think of. “First priority is to get under cover and blend in with the rest of the Muggles. That involves disguises to some degree, but it also requires hitting several Muggle stores. I’d also advise visiting a hairdresser.”

Malfoy’s eyes went wide. “What are you suggesting?”

“A haircut, dear brother. I’m sorry, but between you and Ginny, we are too recognizable. I blend in with the majority of people – girls in black with black hair seem to be in style in this time period, and it fits my style anyway. Potter is relatively nondescript, although we might have to do something to cover up that blasted scar on your forehead.”

Harry brightened a little bit. “You can do that? Magically?”

Nicci snorted. “I was thinking cover-up. Honestly, dependence on magic won’t work here – for all we know, the reason there aren’t any wizards is because magic doesn’t work the same way anymore – or doesn’t work at all.”

"I *know* that's not the case," Malfoy said sharply. "I've been putting Memory Charms on any Muggles that look at us funny, and all the spells have worked."

"So you want us to get whole new wardrobes?" Ginny asked, changing the subject, but with scepticism already in her voice. "And where do you suggest we store all these clothes?"

Nicci flipped a small drawstring bag out of her jacket onto the table. "Undetectable Extension Charm woven in here – that's where I store all my clothes. Whenever I want a new outfit, I just Summon it out."

Harry nodded with understanding – Hermione had done something similar – but Ginny frowned. "Why on earth would you do that? Seems an awful waste."

Nicci rolled her eyes. "I got it done by a few old contacts of mine in that week after the Battle. An old favour, one might say. In any case, I haven't had a permanent home in nearly a year, and I might need a disguise of some sort at any time. Some of the rest I salvaged from my old apartment – the locks on the door were enough that the landlord never could get in." *Didn't mean Severus couldn't, but I wasn't exactly planning on him going in there, either,* she thought, remembering the letter that her brother had found when he had searched her apartment.

"What else do you have in there?" Harry asked, interested. Nicci shrugged.

"A decent quantity of common cash – though most I'll have to get exchanged... a few credit cards for emergencies – which this definitely counts as – lock-picks, spare ammunition for my Uzis, fake identification that I can adapt when I want to... mostly the things I needed to work as a smuggler and dealer in London."

"I'm surprised you don't have a car in there," Malfoy remarked sarcastically.

"Very funny, Malfoy, but one of my cars was blown to pieces running from MI6, and the other was towed at King's Cross," Nicci snapped back. "Although you do raise a good point – a car lease might come

in handy, if we want to travel around extensively. Next priority after disguise is finding some place to bunk out. We want to avoid hostels – there’s an unsavoury crowd that hangs around those places most of the time. Probably until we find a quasi-magical location, we should get to a Muggle hotel of decent quality and bunk out there, preferably downtown.”

“Why downtown?”

“Cause the majority of my contacts are downtown, and I don’t want to waste money on gas driving around the city.”

Harry’s eyebrows narrowed with suspicion. “Do you actually think that any of your contacts are still here?”

“The odds aren’t great,” Nicci conceded, “but there’s a chance. Third priority is finding information – that might involve going to the Leaky Cauldron, Grimmauld Place, or even Hogwarts. Hell, we might even want to try going to Malfoy Manor.”

“Only if there’s no other option,” Harry spoke up, an edge in his voice. “Forgive me, but I’ve got enough bad memories there to last me a lifetime.”

“Oh, sod off, Potter,” Malfoy snapped, turning to look at his former archenemy. “You got out okay... more than what can be said for *my family*...”

“The last thing we need right now is conflict,” Nicci snapped sharply. “Despite all our own insinuations against such a thing, we need to work together. We need to *cooperate* here. If we don’t... well, none of us will have any money or any support here. Except for me. I’m self-sufficient, and could technically leave at any time.” She smirked.

“Is that a threat?” Harry snarled. “I thought you were above that, Nicci.”

“That was then, this is now,” Nicci snapped. “And it’s not a threat – it’s a promise. I’m trying to emphasize a point here, pretty-boy, and one that you apparently don’t understand. If something has gone wrong with our world, then you and your posse here don’t stand a hope of

survival here. You need me, and I'd prefer to operate in a group anyway."

"More scapegoats?" her brother asked lightly, draining the last of his water. Nicci gave him a glare that could have registered as acidic before turning back to the others.

"If you all agree with the plan that I've put forward, we can get moving. If not..." she shrugged her shoulders. "If not, I'd like to hear your alternatives."

Harry sighed. "You didn't give us much room for any, Nicci. Now, I'm not saying that's bad," he hastily added, noting the growing scowl on her pale face. "In fact, I agree with you. But the fact remains that we really *don't* have any alternatives until we find our way back to the wizarding world. And who knows how long that's going to take?"

"True enough," Ginny conceded. "For all we know, we're the last wizards... well, left alive."

Nicci nodded sombrely. "It could indeed be so, but I'm not willing to believe that until we have active proof. Let's get a move on then." She got up to move, but Malfoy remained firmly seated.

"What now, beloved brother?"

"I just want to make one thing clear to you," he said in a low tone, their icy blue eyes meeting. "You're not the leader here, and I don't expect you to tell me what to do."

Nicci couldn't believe what she was hearing, and her utter contempt for her brother was growing every second. "Let's just say," she said calmly, "that if you don't want to take advantage of my experience, that's fine with me. Just don't expect my protection, my assistance or my money. If you want to behave that way, then you're on your own, Draco."

"Malfoy, just cooperate," Ginny said with exasperation. "She's got decent points, and besides, we should stick together."

Malfoy sighed. "Fine. I'm with you then." Nicci saw the implications plain on her brother's face, though: *at least until I see something better.*

Nicci didn't mind adopting that particular philosophy. After all, she had held it herself for years.

"All right, then. Time to go shopping."

--

"You saw them?" the robed man asked warily. "Are you quite sure of their presence? Are you absolutely certain of their identity?"

"No," the thin man – the same 'workman' who Harry had confronted earlier – replied, "I'm not absolutely certain. They could have been disguised agents of some form, working for the Renegade Phoenixes. But the blonde hair was unmistakeable, sir. Unmistakeable. It was Malfoy, with the Shiy-Mord herself."

"They would have no reason to be together, unless she has him in custody," the robed man mused. "But according to your speculations, that's not the case."

"No. If anything, she looked as confused and bewildered as anyone."

"I see. And what about the other two? Did you know them?"

The thin man shook his head. "The young man who questioned me looked familiar, but I couldn't for the life of me remember who he was. The last one... I had no idea. She was wearing all black, and she looked as if she was blending into the shadows. If I didn't know better, I would have called her a wraith of some sort. It was almost as if she didn't even exist..."

"Interesting. All right, this information will be conveyed to the Dark Lord immediately. I'm sure he'll be *most* interested to find that one of his most loyal servants is with the hated leader of one of the rebelling groups. *That* one would make an impressive prize – not to mention the bounty."

“Do you want me going after them?” the thin man asked with anticipation.

“If you do, keep your distance to some degree. Don’t make any moves – your position is important to the Network – but if you happen to run into them again, keep a wary eye. If you happen to catch any of their conversation, all the better.”

“It will be done, sir.”

--

“Here’s where we split up a little bit,” Nicci said firmly, moving beside Ginny.

“And here I remember you saying that you didn’t want to do that,” Harry replied suspiciously. “You’ve been emphasizing that we stick together all the way.”

“I agree with that, but Ginny and I need to do this on our own. You know, girl thing,” Nicci stated firmly, crossing her arms over her chest. “It would be slightly awkward if you chose to come with us. You two pretty boys use the credit cards I gave you and do some shopping, and remember to be back by that bench in five hours. Try and get a haircut while you’re out, so I don’t have to do it for you – trust me, you wouldn’t like the results. And for Merlin’s sake, put a Memory Charm on any shopkeeper who sees you in wizard robes – the last thing we need is for some ignorant twit tipping off the police that weirdos were hanging around his establishment. Worse, we don’t want any other wizards finding out about us.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t like it.”

“I’m not asking you to like it, I’m telling you to do it.”

That pretty much ended *that* conversation. Exchanging a knowing glance, Harry and Malfoy walked away, a noticeable distance between them. Nicci rolled her eyes. She doubted *those* two would be doing their shopping together.

"I can go shopping on my own, you know," Ginny said quietly, as she walked towards a nearby store. Nicci grabbed her shoulders when she saw the décor of the store. Suffice to say, there was a lot of what Nicci would consider 'fringe' clothing there, and her style was risqué enough.

"Hold on a minute, friend. You honestly want to go in that place?"

Ginny frowned. "Why else would I be walking towards there?"

Dumb question, on my part. I'll try again. "No, perhaps the question I should be asking is, "why the *hell* are you going there?"

Ginny sighed and gestured for Nicci to sit down on the bench. "Nicci... despite everything, I've always had six older brothers... five now... to protect and look after me. You never really had that, did you?"

Nicci looked up squarely, her eyes appraising Ginny. "You're not at liberty to ask that, you know."

"Sorry," she apologized instantly.

"But I'll answer your question – you're *right*, as a matter of fact." Nicci sighed. "But believe me; I understand what you're trying to do."

"I don't think you do," Ginny said, her hands curling into fists with frustration. "I've always wanted to be unique, and simply being a girl in my family, I had that role. But my mother... well, you never really got a chance to meet her, but I never wanted to grow up like Molly Weasley. I wanted something different, something unique, something that was *me* alone. I saw what Bill did, and I liked it. But I never really had the independence to do something like it – not to mention that I had no real role models to follow."

Nicci chuckled under her breath. "Girl, you don't want to be following *me* as a role model."

"But I do," Ginny said earnestly. "You're so... independent and smart, so adaptable and strong... it's everything I've ever wanted to be. You know that Harry admires you?"

"I doubt that very much now," Nicci muttered under her breath, recalling her own remarks to him.

"I'm serious, Nicci. He admires that you saw the good in Snape before he did – before any of us, besides Dumbledore, ever did. He admires the fact that you chose to be redeemed and come out of the darkness. And, despite himself, I think he likes you a little bit." Ginny's face was abruptly wistful and threatening at the same time. "You remember my thoughts on that."

"So this is about Harry, then?" Nicci asked, leaning back in her seat. "I thought you said things were back on pace."

"Somewhat, but it's not just him. It's me too. I want something unique, and I admire what you've done."

Nicci let out a bitter laugh, the memories of bloated corpses and flaming cars rising prominently to her mind. "Not a good plan, little girl. You don't want to walk down the same path I did. You'll have to lose a lot more of your innocence before you're ready for that."

Ginny's hands twisted nervously. "I don't want to emulate *everything* about you. Sometimes Nicci... you scare me."

Nicci smiled. "That doesn't surprise me. Sometimes, I'm a pretty scary person."

"That's only part of it. I don't want to 'lose my innocence' like what you say," Ginny said cautiously, "but I do want to emulate some of your personality... your confidence. And your style," she added with a small grin. "I like the whole 'badass' girl sort of thing that you have going."

Nicci raised her eyebrows. "Are you really sure that you want to try something like that, Nicci? You don't seem to be the real 'rebel' type, to me."

"It's what I want, and you seem to be the best one to talk to," Ginny said resolutely. "Can you help me?"

Nicci took a deep breath. “Well, first of all, we aren’t going into that store.”

“I thought you said –”

“Unless you want to wear something that screams ‘psycho gothic whore’, you don’t want to shop there. You want something with more class. There’s a better spot along the street.”

Ginny smiled widely. “Lead on.”

--

Sitting at a small coffee table, a hooded man followed the motion of the girl with his eyes. His hand was clenched on a thin stick of wood in his jacket pocket.

He knew exactly who she was, and everything she represented. Everything that she had done in *his* service represented everything he had fought against for years now. And now it seemed like the perfect opportunity – to take down a Shiy-Mord, a relatively unprotected one, to his eyes.

He didn’t relax his guard – such creatures were exceedingly dangerous, and there could be several guards interspersed throughout the crowd, waiting for him to make his move.

He’d need backup for this operation. Flipping open a Muggle cell phone that rested on the table, he dialled the number and waited for the voice.

A strong, confident voice came over the tone. “Yes?”

“I’ve got a target. One of *them*, from the looks of things. I’ll need backup if I want to bring her down. You want in?”

“I can’t – got to keep on my own case – but I can call in a few to give you a hand. I’ve got your location... yes, I’ll have them there in an hour. Keep her in sight. You want the kill?”

“Absolutely,” the hooded man said shortly. “No sharpshooter’s going to take this one away from me.”

“Good luck then. Oh, and by the way, Fenrir’s back in town. He’ll want to talk to you about the complex northward.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” the hooded man replied, relieved by the information. The line went dead instantly. The hooded man’s eyes followed the girl as she entered the shop with the other figure. He didn’t know that one, but there were dozens of Shiy-Mord he didn’t know.

All Remus Lupin knew was that the Shiy-Mord was not going to get away from him this time. This time, he would put her out of her misery – and do it with pleasure.

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It seemed almost coincidental that both Harry and Malfoy visited the very same hairdresser in the plaza after their shopping. Harry’s eyes could only widen when he saw the massive bags next to the blond wizard. He had ditched his wizard robes – unsurprisingly, consider Harry had done the same – in exchange for casual black slacks with a white collared shirt and black sweater. Harry had to admit that it did look fashionable, to some degree – apparently, Malfoy had very good tastes in Muggle clothing. *Expensive tastes*, Harry thought with a slight curl of his lip, noticing the high qualities of the fabrics.

Malfoy settled down in the cheap leather couch a few seats away from Harry, determinedly ignoring him as he took a swig from the glass bottle next to him and flipped open a Muggle magazine.

“You actually managed to get alcohol, without ID?” Harry asked incredulously.

“It wouldn’t have been hard, Potter,” Malfoy remarked with another swig from the brown-coloured bottle. “A simple Confundus Charm would have made things easy.”

Harry turned away disgustedly. “I can’t believe you, Malfoy. First time you’re without your Slytherin cronies, you decide to get smashed.”

Malfoy chuckled easily. "Give it a rest, will you Potter? Of course it's not alcohol – I couldn't find a pub anyways. It's some Muggle drink. Tastes pretty decent, to my surprise." He turned back to his magazine, and began to read a few of the captions beneath the photographs.

"So what do you plan to do with your hair?" Harry asked, rubbing a hand through his perpetually messy hair.

"Can't be sure at the moment," Malfoy said lightly, flipping a page of his magazine. "You know, it's so strange that none of the characters in these pictures actually *move*. You can't tell anything about their personalities by them just standing here." He frowned with disgust. "I don't even recognize any of these names. Are these people supposed to be famous?"

"Probably. Why?"

"Cause even a few Muggles know about some of the most famous people in our world – all the old wizards like Merlin and such, and even the Dark Lord – but nobody in our world knows anybody famous in their world. Kind of strange, don't you think?"

"It's not helped by your attitude," Harry replied scathingly, remembering the years of prejudice and hatred that Malfoy and his Slytherin cronies had given Hermione and him. "Your superiority complex tends to get in the way of integration."

Malfoy ignored the deliberate insult as he pointed at the page. "Like, look at this fellow. According to this magazine, he's one of the most famous Muggle 'actors' alive. But I've never heard of this 'Tom Cruise'."

Harry shrugged. "Do you like his style or something, Malfoy, or are you just remarking on your own ignorance?"

"I'm just making the point that we barely know these people, and perhaps for our own sake, it might prove prudent, especially if we follow my beloved sister's plans. What do you suppose her motives are?" he added unexpectedly, his icy blue eyes meeting Harry's.

"She's trying to insure that we'll be ready to survive in this world. I don't think she has any ulterior motives," Harry replied, more defensively than he himself would prefer.

Malfoy shook his head. "Something's wrong with that girl. Have you ever seen the shadow that goes in her eyes occasionally? It's... disturbing, and I've seen some of the worst that the Dark Lord had. I've even *used* some of it." He shuddered, and Harry understood. Malfoy's role as a torturer must have been brutal to the young man – especially considering his role as Voldemort's fist was entirely driven by threats and hatred. Despite all his own feelings, Malfoy didn't like torture – although he was good at it. He would have had to be – otherwise Voldemort would have killed him long ago.

Still, Malfoy's revelation about Nicci wasn't surprising. Harry knew she had been through a dark period, and shadows like that might take a long time to resolve.

"I'll keep an eye on her," Harry said cautiously. "But she's not my responsibility. *You're* her brother, after all."

Malfoy could only reply with a disgruntled snort, and turned back to his magazine.

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"This doesn't look good."

"Since when does it ever?"

"He's going after one of them that we sent back! That wasn't planned for!"

"It was to be expected, Croaker. We've got methods of remedying it."

"You're talking about sending another one back. Directly. Forcibly."

"We have to. None of them must die. We need all of them to fix this mess."

"You know, I don't like your methods," a third voice interjected, tired and weary-sounding. "And you know that others have figured out the trick too."

"Of course they have, but you've haven't actually attempted the journey."

"I never wanted to. I don't want to live in hell."

"Yet you're here. Why?"

"Croaker, you know why. I can't watch him suffer. I owe them all too much for that."

"The Circle's broken in that world, you know that."

"All too well. One of the reason's I didn't want to go back, though I've had the option. But I have to. Otherwise he's doomed. All of them are."

"Fine." There was a flash and a drawn-out whistle, and everything was dark again. After a brief silence, the voice resumed. "Well?"

"He's got the potential... not to mention the nerve."

"Do you think it'll save them. Do you think it will repair the River?"

There was a pause, and then, "Nothing's for sure now, Garren. You tell me."

"I can't tell. I'm asking for your opinion."

"That's a first."

"Let's just see what happens. Maybe everything won't be as bad as we think."

There was a whispered sigh. "We know that's not the case, no point fooling ourselves. Let's just watch."

--

It was late afternoon when Nicci finally met with Harry and Malfoy. She was smiling lightly, leaning against a dimming lamp-post. Her hair glistened in the flickering light.

Her brother and Harry *did* look decent, she thought with a degree of satisfaction. Harry was wearing a white hooded sweater with jeans and new sneakers, baggy enough that Harry would be able to hide his wand easily in one of the pockets without suspicion. Malfoy's clothes were of slightly better quality and higher class, but she wasn't entirely surprised – she expected he would have *some* idea of what was fashionable in the Muggle world.

The hairstyles were also what Nicci expected of them. Neither did anything too spectacular. Malfoy's hair had been highlighted and rendered slightly darker, and it was cut relatively short. Harry's was also much shorter, coloured slightly auburn at the edges. Instead of sticking up only in the back, Harry had spiked his hair so it stuck up all over the place. It was a stylish haircut that Nicci had seen in some magazines, but it was also common enough not to draw attention to him. *Wise choice, Potter. Not like your 'girlfriend'. Can't argue with her choices, though – after all, they were her choices.*

Both stopped as they came into the circle of light. Malfoy was first to comment with a huff. "Didn't look like you changed much, sister."

"Are you kidding me?" Harry asked incredulously. "Her hair is bloody *blue*! Blue, Nicci!"

Nicci gingerly touched the midnight-blue streaks that curved through her black hair. She had kept it long – she liked longer hair. She had to admit to herself that it was a rather risky choice to colour her hair this way, but the actual shades were barely visible – and besides, she had seen enough eccentric colours in her time to know that her choice was hardly distinctive.

"I think it looks good," Malfoy said shortly.

Nicci smiled, showing teeth. "Good answer."

"Whatever," Harry said, tossing up his hands. "Where's Ginny, anyway?"

“She’s back at the hotel room we got. She needed some time to get ready. It’s within walking distance, so I didn’t get the car.”

“Pity,” Malfoy muttered. Harry, however, looked stricken.

“You left her *alone* at the hotel? Why on earth – ”

Nicci’s eyes narrowed. “Honestly, Potter, do you think I am that stupid not to leave protection? I’ve got Muggle-Repelling Charms, an Alarm Jinx, and a Runic Protection Symbol on the doors and windows of that room. Nobody can get in or out without me knowing. Ginny is very well protected from external threats.”

Harry visibly relaxed. “Then where is this hotel? We should probably get going there before it gets much darker. I’m not sure this is a very safe place to be around after dark.”

“The hotel’s just four blocks down,” Nicci replied. As she walked, she looked with scorn at Harry. *If you think this is bad, pretty-boy, you haven’t seen the worst sections of this city. It’d be quite an adventure for you there.*

They crossed another street, and she could see Malfoy’s eyes fall on a group of giggling teenage girls by a clothing boutique.

“We’re getting a lot of looks,” Harry noted, and Nicci could see his hand on his wand in his sweater.

“Unlike you, Potter, I’m currently single, and interested. Some of those Muggle girls aren’t half bad looking, you know,” Malfoy remarked, returning the girls’ looks with a warm smile. This only caused the girls to giggle even more. Nicci rolled her eyes. *Juveniles.*

“Assuming you could get past the stink... isn’t that what you’re thinking, Malfoy?” Harry said scathingly. Nicci expected Malfoy to bristle with anger, but to her surprise, he only laughed jovially.

“I’m trying a new outlook to go with my new image, Potter. Don’t dissuade me of it – yet.”

Nicci sighed. This was going to be a long trip.

All of a sudden, she caught a glimpse of dark motion out of the corner of her eye. She casually adjusted her jacket, while at the same time looking in that direction. She saw a dark hood quickly vanish at the sight of her look.

Nicci rolled her eyes. She was being tracked – badly, by the looks of things. Having been a dealer and a smuggler for years, she knew all too well the feeling of being followed. She also knew the best way to deal with it – not to react, and draw the follower into a painfully humiliating trap.

Sooner than she expected, they reached the hotel. It was a large building, with easily a dozen floors. They entered through the glass doors, and both Malfoy and Harry could only stare with unrepressed astonishment at the fine décor of the hotel. Nicci noted the looks and snorted.

“What, did you think I’d get rooms in some sort of dump, Malfoy? I know where the right places in London are – and they aren’t all filth-encrusted muck pits either.”

“It’s grand,” Malfoy murmured, as his gaze took in the glass panelling and the finely polished stone floors. “Almost reminds me of home. I’m surprised – the Muggles do well for themselves.”

“What room is Ginny in?” Harry asked, his eyes sweeping the foyer without a second glance. “What floor?”

“Room 1129, on the eleventh floor. Do you prefer elevator or stairs?”

Harry looked nervous. “We don’t have elevators at Hogwarts. I haven’t been on one in nearly a decade.”

“Then it’ll be a learning experience, then,” Nicci said, steering the two boys towards on a glass plated elevator. They got in and Nicci hit the button for the right floor.

The jolt hit all of them like a shock, and Malfoy and Harry could only clutch the railings of the elevator as it moved up. There was a window on the elevator, looking out over the lounge of the hotel, and both

wizards could only stare in astonishment as the floor seemed to drop out from under them.

“It’s like being on a broom,” Malfoy muttered, his eyes wide with apprehension, “but not as fast or smooth. Are you sure this thing isn’t going to drop out from under us, sister?”

Nicci rolled her eyes. “Elevators accidents happen maybe once in twenty years, Malfoy. We’ll be fine.”

“They soon reached the eleventh floor, and Nicci indulged herself with a small grin as both Harry and Malfoy were the first off the elevator.

“Which room, again?” Malfoy asked, reading the plated signs in the corridor.

“1129, you idiot,” Nicci said sharply, pointing down the hall with a gloved hand. Harry was already at the doors. He stood well enough away – he knew what Nicci had enchanted them with.

Nicci pulled out her wand and – checking to make sure that there were no Muggles in sight – muttered a few words and removed the enchantments. She rapped twice on the door.

A voice immediately came from the opposite side of the door. “Imagery or reality?”

Nicci smirked. “Depends – sometimes they are separate and other times they are the same. I know all too well that yours is blended.”

The door clicked open, and Nicci saw that Ginny had darted around the corner in the room. She had opened the door with a flurry of sparks – Nicci could see the scorch marks on the doorknob.

“Are Harry and Malfoy with you, Nicci?”

“Yes, we are. Come on, Weaslette, I want to see your new ‘Muggle image’,” Malfoy said with a wide grin as he sauntered into the finely accoutred room. Harry was right behind him.

“Come on, Ginny, I want to see too.”

A few seconds passed, and Nicci closed her eyes. This was Ginny's moment. Finally, a slight figure emerged into the light.

All Harry and Malfoy could do was stare – Ginny had indeed *changed*, and it wasn't just in her outfit and hair. It was her image. It was different, darker, edgier... powerful.

For a second, the two wizards couldn't speak, and then...

“Damnit, girl, you don't do anything half-ass, do you?” Malfoy swore. “You went all out... damn, that's impressive. That's *hot*.”

“Watch your tongue, Malfoy, or I might hex it off,” Harry growled, but the astonished look on his face clearly betrayed his anger. “Ginny... *wow*...”

Nicci smiled as she saw Ginny give an experimental twirl. A low-cut red top with tight black pants, coupled with a shiny black leather jacket and heeled calf-length boots completed the ensemble. But it was her hair that was the most shocking. Regularly a fiery red, it was now liberally streaked with black, giving her a downright dangerous appearance. But Harry's surprise was spurred by more than just her outfit – it was the casual way she wore the clothes that shocked him. The hardness in her eyes, tempered with sensuality and innocence that was solely Ginny's, was both riveting and powerfully attractive.

Nicci shoved her way between the wizards and Ginny. “All right, enough with the staring. Ginny's trying a new image.”

“Thank Merlin Ron's not here,” Harry muttered under his breath, and Malfoy chuckled with appreciation.

“Should we just be thanking Merlin her brother Ronniekins isn't here? What about her brothers, or her beloved parents? Won't it be surprising when she heads back to Hogwarts with that sort of image?” Malfoy's smile became dangerous. “Dear, dear, I don't think McGonagall or the other professors are going to appreciate that sort of thing coming out of their house...”

“Cut the crap, Malfoy, we don’t have time for it,” Nicci replied, her tone a mix of amusement and exasperation. She noted Ginny’s face slightly flushing, but took no notice of it, *It was her choice, and she’ll have to get used to the looks.* “Look, I’ve got a few ideas what we can do next.”

“Oh, that’s just great, and for a second I didn’t think we had a plan,” Malfoy replied, his tone dripping with sarcasm. Nicci again fought her urge to strangle him. Instead, she pulled out four long, thin packages and flipped one to Ginny, Harry, and Malfoy. The last she kept in a specially sewn pocket in her jacket.

“What are these?” Harry asked, tearing open the wrapping.

“They’re knives, what did you think they were?” Nicci shot back with a small grin as Ginny slowly drew the long knife out of the simple black leather sheath. “You can’t use your wands for everything, you know, and none of us know enough wandless magic to get by here. So if we get in a close confrontation, use one of these. Who knows – maybe the sight of blood will help you pretty-boys grow a spine.”

Harry stiffened, and his eyes filled with anger. “I’ve seen enough blood in my time, Nicci,” he replied quietly.

“I daresay not as much as I have,” Nicci shot back, a harsh glint in her ice-blue eyes, like the reflection of the sun off an iceberg. “Now, also in those packages are Muggle IDs that I magically falsified to match your profiles. They’re as good, if not better, than anything you’d buy off the black market or get done specially.”

“And why would we need fake IDs?” Ginny asked, as she flipped hers open and stared at the picture. She was surprised and slightly disturbed to find her new picture mirrored her current image. Nicci smirked, despite herself – it had been a tricky bit of magic to pull off, but she had done it.

“One reason – because I need flexibility. When I want to go into clubs and require backup, I’ll need you. In fact, that’s one of our plans tonight.”

Everyone's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "What clubs, exactly, do you want to frequent?" Harry asked cautiously.

"There's a rather nice one, just a few blocks way, in fact. Besides the fact that it tends to cater to a cheaper clientele, it also used to have a few of my contacts there, and with enough money, memories come back fast." Nicci folded her arms across her chest. "I need to re-establish my primary contacts down here, and that also requires that I take a stock of the situation, both magical and non-magical. Hopefully, I'll be able to contact my prime target – one who has contacts in both the magical and non-magical world."

"And who would that be?" Ginny asked, bewildered. "Is he a Muggle or something?"

"He's a Squib, and he calls himself K-Crank," Nicci replied with a grim smile, "but you might better know him as *Keith Shackbolt*." Harry and Ginny exchanged shocked looks. They remembered meeting Kingsley's Squib brother after the Battle, and both had been surprised by the gangster – by his comfort around wizards and by his attitude.

"So what's the plan, then?" Malfoy asked. Nicci shook her head.

"I'll tell you later, over dinner. By the way," she added, all traces of a smile vanishing from her face, "I think we might be being followed. If you manage to see the fellow, grab him and bring him to me – I want to know how he knows who we are. And depending on how truthful he is, I might vary the amount of pain I put him through."

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Remus Lupin had watched the two wizards and the witch go up the elevator. Even closer, he had watched the electronic dial stop at the eleventh floor. He clenched his fist – the eleventh floor was high. It would make the group easier to corner, but it would also make traps for him more difficult to evade.

His cell phone buzzed. With a silent curse, he picked up. "What now?"

“The team will take a little more time to bring in place. There’s gang activity south-west of Kent.”

“Since when is that a priority?” Lupin hissed furiously. “We can’t pass up on a chance to bring these ones down!”

“I *know* that, so just hold on! Fortunately for you, if you manage to tail them long enough, we might be able to put a Tracer Hex on them.”

“I already tried, but for some reason the magic disjoined,” Lupin replied with frustration. “If we’re going to tail them, we’ll have to do it manually. I still say we send in a team to take them out.”

“If the gangs are active, you know the League won’t approve of it. They need everything to trace *his* next movements.”

“The League vacillates,” Lupin sneered. “They won’t care if we send in a team to shut this operation down.”

“I know that, but you know the others won’t approve. By the way, our friendly traveller just got back from New York.”

Lupin swore under his breath – the last thing he needed was ignorant interference. “And?” he asked through gritted teeth.

“It went badly, Remus. Really bad. They won’t even talk to us now.”

Lupin swore again. *Typical, that he would screw up this bad.* “What do you want me to do, then? I don’t want to watch one of *them* get away again!”

“Calm down, we can work this out. Follow them on foot, casually. If the Network or the Others find out about them, cut the links before *he* can find out. Otherwise... keep your distance until we can get a team in place.”

Lupin sighed. “Fine. I’ll talk to you later.” He killed his line and swore under his breath. Even as much of a renegade as he was, bureaucracy still tied his hands.

He drifted towards an equipment corridor and watched as the two witches and two wizards left the elevator, chatting amicably. He could only watch, with narrowed eyes, as they walked out into the dimming night.

She's not getting away from me, he thought. Not this time.

Slowly, but still keeping the group in his line of sight, he followed, his hand still clenched around the fragile shaft of his wand.

Chapter 5

The club was dark, and filled with flickering lights, almost as if the stars were in whirling, erratic motion, tearing the sky to shreds. Even despite the dozens of people packed into the club, Nicci didn't relax her guard. She knew better than most what could happen in a place like this when dealings went sour.

Harry and Ginny had gone in together through a side entrance, but Nicci could see them both. They looked like a happy couple, one of the dozens in the club that night.

In the pit of her gut, she felt a cold knot of envy begin to form. She had only had one boyfriend in Hogwarts – a Slytherin fellow whose brains could fill a mustard seed and who she had taken on as a dare.

A week after she went out with him the first time, she had gotten the letter from Dumbledore about her parents. That pretty much ended the relationship.

I should be feeling happy for the pretty boy, she thought to herself as she skirted the dance floor with casual ease. He's faced his trials and has come out ahead. He killed the Dark Lord after a year away from her. He deserves this time.

Yet despite those thoughts, her hand clenched into a fist. She didn't know Harry Potter very well, but she knew him well enough to make one statement - *Ginny can do better. Plenty better.*

A fast-paced American hip-hop song came on, but Nicci toned it out. Her eyes were scanning the crowd for her brother. Where was he -

Her eyes fell on the young man. He was sitting at the bar, and a beverage she too knew was alcoholic was already in his hand. She snorted. Malfoy was doing his job all too well.

She circled the room towards an inconspicuous side door. Taking a deep breath, she rapped on it twice.

There was some muffled swearing, and then the door opened a crack, revealing a bloodshot eye. An angry, bloodshot eye.

“Yeah, chick, whaddya want now? I don’t got time to deal with more than one of you at once!”

Nicci rolled her eyes. *Drunken bastard*, she thought acidly. “Deals need to be made, Shammer, and you can’t hold me out this time.”

“Shorty, I dunno who the hell you are, but I don’t let my name out openly –”

“Then how did I get it?” Nicci asked, her voice deadly. Her Uzi was shoved against the crack of the door. “Now let me in, Shammer, or I’ll riddle your fine little door with bullets.”

There was a muffled curse and the door opened just wide enough for Nicci to squeeze in. The man on the other side, dressed only in a half-buttoned shirt and drab jeans, was at least twice Nicci’s age, with a sloping face and drab, watery eyes. The room was poorly lit – as Nicci expected – and a large, somewhat soiled bed was shoved in the corner. She could see the bottles strewn around the room, and from the crack of the closet door, Nicci could guess that her old contact had company.

The man gave a short whistle. “Damnit, girl, forget my company. Either that or we can make it a threesome –”

“Shut the hell up, I’m not shagging you, Daniel Shammer,” Nicci replied curtly, closing the door behind her and levelling her Uzi at the closet. “Who’s the girl you got back there?”

“Nobody special,” Shammer replied with a shrug. “Typical friend.”

“That ain’t your style, Shammer,” Nicci said coolly, moving closer to the man. “At least it wasn’t. You used to be one for uniqueness. At least that’s what you said last time I interrupted your little escapade.”

Shammer let himself have a short, barking laugh. “Sure, sure, but that’s in the past, shorty. I soon realized that one’s not different than the others.” He paused, and then looked at Nicci with narrowed eyes.

“I never told anyone about my ‘passion for uniqueness’. Who the fuck are you, girl?”

Nicci sighed. “You probably don’t remember me. We worked together: I gave you cash, you gave me information and sets of keys. You made plenty of money of our business.”

Shammer cocked an eyebrow. “I’ve *never* made high-class deals before, at least not on the scale you’re talkin’ about. And trust me, I’d remember you.” His lecherous raked over every inch of Nicci’s lithe form. Nicci restrained her urge to depress the trigger on her Uzi.

“So you remember nothing of me?” she asked with a sigh. It would have been ten years, and she wasn’t really surprised – Shammer had blown out enough of his brains with alcohol.

“Sorry, girl, nothing springs to mind. Although, if you want big deals, I can point you in the right direction.” Shammer looked somewhat shifty when he said this, and Nicci smirked. This was what she wanted to hear.

“I’m listening. Give me some general knowledge first, and then I’ll pay you after I get some names and locations.”

“I’m surprised you don’t know,” Shammer replied, “considering you came to talk to me. I’m not especially high on the radar screen. You from out-of-town, shorty?”

“You could say that,” Nicci growled. Shammer was a Muggle, but he always had a queer knack for getting more information out of people than he should be able to. That’s why she had utilized him. “Give me the basics. You know the drill. Who’s in charge?”

“Well, for most of the typical smuggling, you’ve got the Hell’s Angels and a few other foreign gangs. Nothing’s changed there in decades, but I suppose you knew that.”

“I did. What about inter-city stuff? Who’s running the major operations, and where can I contact people?”

“What kind of people do you need?”

“Don’t play games with me, Shammer. You should have a rough idea what I want.”

“I wanna see your money first.” Nicci scowled, but flipped him a stack of Muggle cash. She had visited a bank while she had been shopping with Ginny, and had gotten several bundles of money.

Shammer flipped his way through the stack, and then looked up. “We’ve got what one could call gang war in Britain these days. Makes things difficult to coordinate.”

Nicci’s eyes narrowed. “Hell’s Angels involved? Anything foreign?”

“Can’t tell, but some of the sponsorship definitely is. Most are getting’ cash straight from the Middle East on weapon sales, and that’s jacking up their stockpiles here. Basic weed and shit comes from the smaller dealers, and the Hell’s Angels are handling the coke, but someone’s got a lot of heroin, and it’s sparkin’ a fucking war.”

“So give me the basics. Who’s involved, and where are the leaders?”

“We’ve got three main groups. First group is MKT. They’re responsible for the majority of the pimps and music business that we’ve got going on here. Now, it’s run by two Americans and one of us. Primary location is a private, exclusive club in London. Here’s the address,” Shammer tossed her a piece of paper with a hastily scrawled address. “You’ll need an ‘invitation’ to get in, and they don’t put up with any shit.”

“I can bet,” Nicci muttered, her mind already churning. She already had a fair idea who the English gangster was – K-Crank was likely doing very well for himself. “What about the rest?”

“Second gang’s called the IT. Nobody knows what the real name is, but they’re the ones that have the majority of the drugs under wraps. They’re the ones that have the Middle Eastern connections.”

“What’s with these connections anyways?” Nicci asked tersely, trying to keep the exasperation out of her voice. “How can they get so much?”

Shammer looked sideways at her. "Have you been living under a rock for the past decade, shorty? Haven't you seen the news, heard about the war down there? Hell, weren't you here when the bastards hit *us*? Terrorists, I tell you, and in my books, IT's likely dealing with 'em. I wouldn't cross them in the slightest. They also tend to be on the move, and we can't trace them easily. If you want where they are now, I'll need some time."

"Don't bother," Nicci replied, keeping her typical, glacial calm that she had perfected in business. Inside, she was seething. She hadn't had a chance to catch up on the Muggle news, and apparently plenty had happened since 1998. "Who's the last group?"

Shammer looked carefully around before lowering his voice. "They're called the Others. Dangerous bastards, they are. They're the ones getting all the weapons in, and they don't have any problems using 'em. They're the ones who started this whole mess. They're a bunch of spies and killers, and I don't like dealing with 'em. Won't deal with if I have a choice."

"But you still do?"

"You can't exactly say no, girl. When they hold a long knife to your temple and tell you to deal, you deal." Shammer shuddered, and Nicci felt a chill go down her spine. It sounded exactly like when she was dealing with the Death Eaters.

"So where are *they* based?"

"I don't have the damndest clue, and I don't want to know either. Your best bet, if you wanna make a big deal, is to go to MKT and talk to them. If you have enough money, anything's possible."

"True enough." Nicci turned to leave. "Remember, my lips are sealed about being here – as are yours and your whore's. I have no compunction as being just as lethal as the Others when it comes to information."

"And what gives you the firepower to back a claim like that up?" Shammer looked scornful. Nicci turned back, and gave him a chillingly murderous smile.

“Oh, you can just count on me. I’m reliable when it comes to this sort of thing. Remember Damion Ziani – you knew what I did to him.” And with that, Nicci walked out the door.

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Shammer only scratched his head in confusion at the last comment. Something didn’t seem right about the girl. How familiar she acted towards him, when he hadn’t ever seen him before. And her commentary – how did she not know about terrorism?

Strangest of all was the last comment. The fact of the matter was, he *knew* Damion Ziani, and had for two decades. The Italian smuggler had amassed himself quite a fortune, but he still found it convenient to drop by and talk to Shammer occasionally.

Wonder what that chick did to Ziani, he thought, rubbing the back of his neck. *Probably can’t hurt to ask him. Although, with a bitch like that, I’m not sure I’d want to be talking either.*

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Nicci slid up next to Malfoy at the bar. “Change of plans,” she said abruptly. “My source had less information than I expected.”

“What a surprise,” Malfoy remarked, taking another swig from the bottle in front of him. Nicci eyed it with some interest – she had thought that Malfoy would get something slightly stronger than a beer.

“However, he did give us a hint in the right direction. We have to head to a different club in London. Where’s Potter and Ginny?”

Malfoy jerked a thumb backwards towards a small private table, where Harry and Ginny were quietly talking. Nicci noted that they were sitting *very* close together, and she sighed.

“He’s all over her,” Malfoy continued with distaste, finishing his beer and shoving the bottle to the bartender. “It’s bloody disgusting, if you ask me. She could do so much better than him.”

“What? You?” Nicci asked teasingly. Malfoy looked scandalized.

“Of course not *me*, but somebody other than Potter. They don’t... fit, if you catch my drift.”

“I do, but I want to hear you explain this,” Nicci said slyly. “We have some time, so why don’t you just tell me your little metaphysical reasoning on why dear Ginny shouldn’t date Saint Potter over there.”

Malfoy scowled as he turned back towards the bar and rapped his knuckles on the counter. The barman slid two beers across the counter towards Nicci and Malfoy, but Nicci slid hers back. She preferred to remain sober in times like this – she wanted to remember every word her brother said. *If anything*, she thought, *his words will only confirm what I’ve been feeling in my gut for years.*

“It’s clear you detest him,” Nicci began slowly, her gaze casually drifting throughout the room. *No sign of that stalker. Good.*

“It’s that obvious, isn’t it?” Malfoy muttered as he scratched his jaw. “I remember the day I met him. We never even knew each other’s names, but we talked a little bit. We made idle conversation – nothing significant. He was with Hagrid, who was taking him to buy his supplies. I made small talk, and in the course of the conversation, I let slip the family beliefs.”

“That pure-bloods are superior to everyone,” Nicci finished with a scowl.

“Don’t blame me for that,” Malfoy snapped. “I was fed the family line, just like our father and my mother were. Hell, every Malfoy heard that line, and if you didn’t toe it, you were out. The comfort factor is one reason why Malfoys didn’t typically step out of line.”

“So basically,” Nicci concluded with a small smile, “you were all suck-ups and cowards. I’m almost grateful that I was a bastard daughter.” She meant that with some sincerity – although in the pit of her gut, the deep-seated anger at her rejection still rankled. “None of you had the guts to stand up to the family line.”

Malfoy bristled at the insult, but he ignored the words. “Suffice to say, Potter told Hagrid everything, and the half-giant had already established a connection with Potter. I was an unknown factor, and

since my opinions were in opposition to Hagrid's, do you think I had a hope in hell of progress?

"So then we met again – on the Hogwarts Express. I was with the sons of two family friends – Crabbe and Goyle. They weren't really friends, but they served me well in the Slytherin Common Room. I met Potter on the train, but he had already become well-acquainted with Weasley. I never knew the family personally – my father didn't really talk much about them. I mean, I knew they were pure-blood, but they never floated in the same circles as we did.

"Still, I knew that it could be beneficial for our family to become friendly with *The-Boy-Who-Lived*, so I offered him my hand. And you know what? He turned it down. I offered my *help*, and he turned it down. It didn't help that Weasley had already told him that Slytherins were a pack of Dark wizards, and Potter knew I was destined for that house. In my opinion, Weasley had more to do with our estrangement than anything I said."

"I find your little innocence act hard to believe, brother," Nicci remarked sceptically, her eyes narrowing. "From everything I've heard, you're not the victim. If anything, you made Potter the victim."

Malfoy shrugged. "I'm a product of my circumstances and my family. If I had been brought up in a household like Potter's, do you think things would have been different? Would I have the same thoughts and ideals?"

Nicci paused for a second. Her brother *did* have a salient point, but she wasn't going to simply trust his innocence just because he suggested it. *If anything, he's more of a wimp now than he ever was*, she thought idly, *since he's not willing to stand up for himself. I should probably see about remedying that at some point – might be healthy for the prick.*

Malfoy, smirking slightly, took a swig of his beer.

"So, when Potter ended up in Gryffindor and I ended up in Slytherin, I knew there was going to be problems. The house rift was too wide to be crossed, and I knew better than to approach him with friendship

any longer. You know as well as anyone how traitors are treated in our house.”

“All too well,” Nicci muttered, her own memories flicking back to the snide insults, the dark insinuations and threats, all at the hands of her own housemates. “All too well.”

“So I toed the line, like my family expected me to,” Malfoy said simply. His speech was slightly slurring, and Nicci knew that Malfoy had consumed more alcohol than was probably wise. “And since Potter was in Gryffindor, we were compared. We were set up to be archenemies, his friends and mine. Myself, Crabbe, and Goyle versus Potter, Weasley, and Granger. Suffice to say, I got the short end of the stick. I’m not afraid to admit that I got some questions from my parents at why I was not at the top of my year, but I had no desire to rise to Granger’s level, either. And when Potter proved himself the *hero* at the end of the year, I do admit there was a degree of jealousy there. He was loved by the teachers, by the Headmaster, by *all* his peers, and I... I was ostracized because of my status as Potter’s archenemy.”

No doubt about it, he’s definitely drunk, Nicci thought as she watched Malfoy closely. *He would never admit stuff like this in front of me otherwise. It would be decent of me to tell him to stop, but...*

“Then came second year,” Malfoy said, draining the last of his beer from his bottle. He rapped his knuckles on the bar again, and the barman, with a deeply distrustful look at Nicci (which she returned with a sneer), slid another beer to Malfoy. From the wetness of the bottle, Nicci bet it was the same bottle she had been offered earlier. “Our father decided to take the direct approach of interference. He wanted the Weasleys out of his way, Dumbledore out of Hogwarts, and the Mudbloods... Muggle-borns... purged from the school. And like any good son, I went along with him.”

Nicci snorted. “You should have used your head. Didn’t you know your father’s plan to open the Chamber of Secrets would get you into trouble?”

"It put me under suspicion, but that was nothing. Remember, Nicci, I was *twelve*, not eighteen. And Lucius Malfoy was an intimidating man back then – Azkaban hadn't ruined him yet."

"In other words, you were a spineless ass, enjoying your infamy at the expense of others, all because your father was Dark as sin."

"Don't be so quick to judge," Malfoy muttered, glaring at Nicci. "You probably would have done the same thing. And of course, beloved Potter only comes out ahead *again*. It only inflated his already overlarge head. He was insufferable enough, and the last thing we needed was more of his success. Besides being a family setback, it wasn't pleasant being the archenemy – especially one blamed originally for opening the blasted Chamber."

"But I thought everyone knew Ginny opened it," Nicci asked cautiously, her eyes narrowing. Malfoy shook his head.

"The issue was hushed up, sister. You would never have heard about it. And then came third year. If anything I resented Potter even more coming out of summer – it wasn't pleasant around the Manor. And then he rides on his high horse with success, and because I was idiotic enough not to listen to that oaf Hagrid – who occasionally *does* know what he's babbling about – I get my arm slashed. Contrary to popular belief, I didn't do it on purpose."

"Sure, sure."

"You think I would put myself through that much pain just to get Hagrid sacked?" Malfoy asked with a scowl, his motions more unsteady as he took another swig of his beer. "Hardly. For that, I would want the entire goddamned "Trio" thrown out of Hogwarts. I'm not afraid to say I milked it for all it was worth, though."

Nicci shook her head with disgust. "Manipulative bastard."

"It runs in the family, and besides, I had to get something out of it. What do you think our father would have said to the comment, "just because your son Draco was an idiot, he nearly got himself killed"? Oh, *that* would have made for a pleasant conversation at home. So like a good son, I told him that the Hippogriff was mad, and like any

good father, he tried to get the damned beast executed. Suffice to say, I enjoyed the process – and why not? I didn't like Hagrid, and that blasted thing nearly killed me.”

Keep talking, Malfoy, you've got me interested now. “And so that only set you against the group even more, particularly Potter.”

“He always had a soft spot for Hagrid, but things got even worse the next year. He somehow gets chosen to be a Hogwarts Champion, *despite* the fact that he's underage.” The bitterness in Malfoy's tone was palpable. “I wasn't the only one who was angry.”

“That was the Dark Lord's *plan*, Malfoy –” Nicci began, but her brother laughed outright.

“I only found *that* out later in the year, after I heard the whole story from my father. It wasn't a pretty situation, to be sure. That was also around the time,” Malfoy continued darkly, “that my father began sizing me up for Death Eater membership.”

Nicci felt a chill go down her spine. “You knew what they did, didn't you?”

“I knew,” Malfoy hissed, more to himself, “and I didn't care. Hell, our father was one of them, as you well know – what kind of son sets himself against his father, I thought. I had no desire to get disinherited, and so I played along with the little act. And don't get me wrong here – Potter and his pals were just as ruthless to me as I was to them. He was the one breaking the rules, and just because he was able to escape punishment most of the time doesn't mean squat. In my case, why bother breaking the rules when they work in your favour?”

Nicci rubbed her jaw. “Surely you must have had somebody to vent this to, or at least talk to.”

Malfoy scoffed, even as his tone grew even more slurred. “Who do you think I am? What house do I come from? What happened to me happened to every other decent pure-blood in our house, and most of them didn't have the stomach or intellect to stand against it. And besides, who was I going to talk to? Crabbe and Goyle were imbeciles, Blaise was a spineless twit, Nott was a grovelling,

conniving bastard, and Pansy was utterly *insufferable*. Thank Merlin *that's* over with.” He took another swig of his beer and then continued. “She went after me starting in the third year, but it all started to culminate around the fifth and sixth years. She wanted me for the same reasons that most Slytherins want things – money and prestige. Power.”

“So you slept with her, then?” Nicci asked, keeping the emotion out of her voice. She didn’t give a rat’s ass who Malfoy had slept with, but she wanted her brother to keep talking – it was fascinating hearing the other side of the story.

“Hardly,” Malfoy replied with a snort. “I accommodated her crude little entreaties for a few weeks, and then sent her packing midway through sixth year. I dated a few other girls, but then... well, other priorities took over.” His face, flushed due to the alcohol, lost some of its colour.

“You got recruited,” Nicci finished. She knew this side of the story – Harry had told her most of it, but she wanted to hear the truth from Malfoy’s point of view.

“Damned straight. Lucius Malfoy was so *proud* when heard that I took the Mark. But really, what choice did I have? I was eager, sure, because I thought there was a chance that our family could get something back. Some *glory*, after our father landed in Azkaban. But I realized the truth, and it wasn’t hard to figure out, really. Lucius screwed up, and I was the scapegoat. I was given the impossible task, and I had to deal with it. Nearly killed my mother, but what choice did I have?”

“You could have said no,” Nicci said softly, her hands clenched into fists – a shadow had flickered in the corner of her vision, and she knew that the stalker was back. “You could have faced him – died like a man.”

Malfoy eyed her with sober eyes for a second before he drifted back to bleary drunkenness. “Do you believe that, sister? Do you really believe I would do that? I wanted to live, not die. *I had no choice.*”

“Now you do, at least,” Nicci replied softly.

Malfoy snorted. "Let's be realistic, here. I'm the archenemy of the hero who killed the Dark Lord – do you really think I'll go far? Do you really think I have a chance? I can't make amends with Potter now – not only because I have no desire to, but because there's too much bad blood between us. I stood by and watched as Granger was tortured. He nearly killed me with Snape's curse *Sectumsempra*."

"He saved your life, so I've been told," Nicci reminded him, her hand slowly drifting to a concealed pistol in her jacket. The silencer was screwed on, so she had a fairly good shot at taking out her stalker without others noticing.

"Believe me, that's the last thing that I want on my conscience," Malfoy said, draining his last bottle of beer. He began to rap his knuckles on the bar, but Nicci gripped his wrist under the counter.

"So why don't you think Ginny is good for Potter?" Nicci asked softly, her eyes fixed on Malfoy, but her gaze monitoring the stalker, who was wearing a black hood and creeping closer and closer. *Just a minute more, before I move.*

Malfoy looked at the couple, who were now whispering to each other and laughing lightly. "Taking blood out of it, that girl has all the power and intellect of Potter and Weasley combined, minus the arrogance and sentimental attitude. She has potential and drive – Potter's a vacillating moron that can't take a shit without asking Dumbledore's permission or moaning about his losses. He needs to get over that – he doesn't see *us* complaining." He gave her a significant glance. "My mother told me some of what happened to you, but she didn't tell me everything."

"Good," Nicci replied shortly, "because the truth will probably give you nightmares for the rest of your life." Her eyes tensely scanned the crowd, and lit on the stalker in a second. *I've gotta shoot soon.* She knew it would be a hard shot – shooting through a crowd towards a concealed target – but she didn't have any option. Spells were easier to aim than speeding bullets, and she bet easily that her tracker was a wizard.

She stood up and threw a look at Ginny and Harry. She flicked her wrist lightly, trying to get their attention – the last thing that she

needed was for her stalker to figure out she had backup – but the two were lost in each other's eyes. Nicci swore under her breath. *Love-struck idiots*, she thought acidly.

She shoved Malfoy. "Go get Potter and Ginny. It's time to get out of here."

Malfoy stood slightly, and still muttering dire imprecations against Potter under his breath, he began to stagger his way to their table. Nicci kept her eye on the stalker – who was he really after?

Malfoy stumbled a bit, and Nicci saw, with some degree of satisfaction, that the stalker's attention seemed distracted. The hooded figure's gaze turned to the drunken teenager.

Nicci's eyes narrowed. Something didn't seem right. From a certain angle, it didn't look as if the hooded figure was focusing on Nicci at all. It was more like he was looking at Ginny and Harry...

She saw the thin wand come up, and Nicci knew she had no other options. Snapping her pistol up, she sighted down the barrel and made one silent shot. The bartender, fortunately for her, was looking the other way.

The bullet whistled through the crowd, with incredible accuracy, but the shot still went wide, blowing a deep hole in the stone wall inches away from the stalker's wand-hand. Stone and plaster chips blew out, and the stalker flipped his wand forward, taking aim at Nicci –

Nicci knew she had no other options now. She ducked down behind her seat as the stalker's curse went high. Glasses hanging suspended above the bar exploded and sprayed fragments everywhere. The bartender howled in pain as a particularly jagged piece lodged in the back of his hand.

It was pandemonium, and Nicci could see the security begin to flood in. She swore under her breath, but she knew she had no choice. She pulled out a small explosive, with a rudimentary timer, and stuck it under the counter. Dialling the timer up to five minutes, she darted into the crowd and began fighting her way towards her companions.

This wasn't the first time she had caused considerable havoc in a bar, but at least this time, there would be considerably less collateral damage.

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Lupin swore violently, brushing stone chips off his hand and taking a firmer grip on his wand. He scanned the crowd for the girl who had nearly shot him, but she was nowhere to be found. Security was already streaming in.

"Lucky little girl," he muttered with another curse as he slid along the wall away from the exits. He knew the first direction everyone would be heading would be the exits in this sort of situation – and that likely included his targets. He scanned the crowd anxiously. *Where was she –*

He saw a flash of red and black, and took aim again. "*Reducto! Stupefy! Stupefy!*" he shouted, but his voice was lost in the chaos. His spells, however, streaked through the crowd, scorching holes in the wall and striking a few people who hadn't managed to leave the dance floor yet.

Suddenly, a screeching ring began to echo through the room. Almost without warning, the fire bells began to wail and the sprinklers clicked on. Lupin, standing right beneath one of the bells, swore again and covered his ears. He began moving faster, knocking out anybody who got in his way as the red lights began to flash and circle.

He hadn't planned for the chaos, but he was going to be damned if the Shiy-Mord got away this time.

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Harry had bolted up the second he had seen the glasses explode. "Malfoy, what's happening? What the –"

Malfoy staggered closer and nearly fell over as a panicked man shoved him against the table. "I dunno – someone musta dropped the hammer –"

“He’s drunk,” Ginny spat with disgust as she got up. “What on earth did you do now, Malfoy?”

Almost like a shadow coming out of the night, Nicci shot out of the crowd. Four people were strewn on the dance floor with nasty bruises across their faces, and Nicci was massaging her knuckles. She looked frantic, and her black-blue hair flashed in the light. “We need to get out of here – we’ve got wizard trouble. I *told* you we didn’t want to contact the wizarding world yet –”

“Nicci, what’s going –” Harry began, but Nicci only grabbed him by his sweater and pulled him out of the booth, cursing and swearing all the way. Ginny grabbed Malfoy by the collar and pulled him forward in the same manner.

“Seriously, what the hell? This isn’t necessary –”

Nicci turned, and roundly slapped Harry across the face. “Shut up *now*, Potter, before I make it last longer than you’d like! We’ve got a stalker after us, and we need to get *out* of here before everyone here ends up dead!” Almost subconsciously, she grabbed the fire-alarm and wrenched it down. Almost immediately bells began to wail and the sprinklers clicked on. The screams redoubled. The lights began to go bright red and circle throughout the club.

“Nicci, what are you –” Ginny gasped, dragged a sodden and swearing Malfoy forward. Nicci could barely hear her words, but she knew what was happening.

“No time to explain, we need to *move*!” Nicci yelled, grabbing Harry by the sleeve and shoving them towards a side exit. She knew that she only had less than a minute left before the bomb went off. “Get out, get *out*!”

For once in his life, Harry complied. Staring daggers at Nicci, he smashed his way through the fire-escape door, Ginny and Malfoy at their heels. Nicci waited for a second. *Any second now* –

He came, shoving through the crowd, a murderous look on his face. He looked vaguely familiar, but Nicci wasn’t concerned about his face. She was concerned about the wand he was brandishing at her.

The stalker brandished his wand, and in a hoarse voice, bellowed, “*STUPEFY!*”

“*PARIETIS!*” Nicci screamed, jabbing her own wand out. The Stunning Spell ricocheted off the invisible wall that erupted from her wand and hit the rotating, silvery ball on the ceiling. It shattered into a dozen fragments, and the hooded figure raised his hand to cover his eyes –

Nicci knew she only had a second, and turning, she dove headlong out the door, coming into a shoulder roll. She awkwardly kicked the door as she left, and it slammed shut with a metallic click. *A few more seconds...*

Almost on her own count, the bomb blew up. She could see the shockwave hit the door, but she knew it hadn’t likely caused a lot of damage. *Figures*, she thought darkly. *Probably didn’t even take out the stalker.*

She got up quickly, vaulted over a trashcan, and darted into the alley she had designated as the rendezvous point if something had gone wrong. Harry, Malfoy, and Ginny were crouched, lurking in the shadows.

“You all okay?” Nicci asked tersely. They nodded, and Nicci continued briskly. “The explosive that I used probably didn’t kill the bastard, but that’s all right – less deaths on my conscience, the better.”

Malfoy looked pale and wan, and Nicci counted off the seconds. *Any second now, he’s going to hurl.* And, surely enough, Malfoy leaned over and disgorged the contents of his stomach. Ginny and Harry both took two steps back, looking disgusted.

“And it tasted so good going down,” Malfoy muttered thickly as he wiped his mouth. Nicci rolled her eyes.

“So who was that person following us?” Harry asked tersely, fingering his wand.

Nicci raised her hands. "No idea, but for some strange reason, I don't think it is a Death Eater. There wasn't as much damage as I expected."

"Considering you caused most of it," Ginny muttered. "What's the next plan?"

"We're going back to the hotel," Nicci said coolly, "and tomorrow we'll make new plans. It's too dangerous to try and hit another club tonight – many of them will have extra security. They won't be as willing to accept bribes like the security here tonight. We might also make time to try and find Grimmauld Place or Diagon Alley. Who knows – we might even find a *Daily Prophet* to tell us what's going on. And besides," she looked with distaste at Malfoy, who was retching again on the wet concrete, "he's in no fit state to travel."

"I'm not carrying him back to the hotel," Ginny said promptly. "I just got this outfit – I don't want it ruined by Malfoy puking all over it."

Nicci snorted. "I don't have a problem hauling my beloved brother back to his room. It was his choice anyway to get smashed. All we have to do is stay out of his way in the morning."

"Why?"

"Because with his hangover, he'll likely be madder than the Dark Lord himself."

--

"Well, I hope that turned out the way you wanted it too, Garren."

"Course it did. They're alive, aren't they?"

"Someday you're going to realize – and I'm going to be there on that day – that simply surviving isn't the only thing that's important. People have to live, Garren, not just survive."

His voice was abruptly cold. "I've lived all these years by surviving, Croaker. It's the only way I could get through it all. What I see... what I have seen... I can't blot those images out, Croaker. By hell, I wish I

could, but I know I can't. The Orb only makes it worse, and I can't get rid of it."

"You could."

"I have no desire to die, Croaker."

There was a scoff of cold, bitter laughter. "For someone like you, would you really feel the difference?"

--

Lupin pulled himself to his feet and swore. He was bleeding in a dozen different places, and his robes were smoking, but he was alive. He flipped open the battered cell phone in his pocket and dialed.

"Yes, Remus?"

"We've got problems. I think they might suspect."

"Dear God, Remus, did you go in without backup? I thought Fenrir *told* you –"

"I had no choice," Lupin hissed sharply. "I would have lost them if I hadn't acted."

"Sure, sure. You've said that on more than one occasion."

Lupin stiffened. "Don't push me, Thomas. I'm not in the mood."

"Since when are you ever?" There was a beep on Lupin's cell phone, and he quickly glanced down. *A caller wants in on the line. Great – the last thing I need right now.* He raised the phone to his ear again. "We've got someone who wants in."

"Only those from the League know about the connection. Put him on."

There was a short pause, and then a familiar voice clicked over. "Hello, Moony. Long time, no chat."

Lupin went rigid. "Who gave you this number? I thought I made it *very* clear to you that I don't want you contacting me again."

“Dear God, Remus, it was nearly fifteen years ago. Get over it! Cliff Thomas, is that you on the line?”

“Yes,” the first voice said tersely. “As you well know, I am Remus’ coordinator.”

“How’s Dean doing?”

“None of your damned business. Look, what do you want?”

“Well, I was sent by a friend of mine to ask for a little progress report, and since his little escapade didn’t go so well, I wanted to hear some success stories coming from your section.”

Lupin rolled his eyes in disgust. “And I don’t give a damn whatever the hell your little friend thinks, because *it’s over*. Now get off this line before I send a curse through it.”

“You know, this whole situation could be solved if you just got over it.” The second voice was mockingly sarcastic. “I thought I knew you better than that, Moony.”

“And I thought I knew you better too, but it appears we both learned our lessons. Leave.” There was a dangerous tone in Lupin’s voice as that connection of the line went dead.

“Would it really hurt you to make amends, Remus?” the first voice asked quietly.

Lupin sighed. “Cliff, I can’t. After what that bastard did to me, to my friends, after what he did to *her* - I can’t forgive him. Not a chance.”

“So what was the problem with your little attack? You wanted to tell me something?”

“Yes,” Lupin replied, taking a deep breath. “I think we’ve got another Shiy-Mord on the scene. Nasty bitch – using both Muggle technology and magic simultaneously.”

“Was the previous target there also?”

“Yes – they were both together. Problem is, I can’t figure out their mission. It doesn’t seem obvious.”

“And that likely means it’s straight from the top,” the voice on the other line said with a sigh. “Look, I’ll do the best I can to bring together a team, but it won’t be easy. You *know* he’ll want to be on it.”

“Then Mr. Ambassador-from-Hell will have to do the mission without me,” Lupin snarled. “I can’t work with him – you know the reasons for that, Cliff.”

There was another sigh. “Another one you can’t make amends with. You’re racking up a lot of enemies, Remus. It’s a damned shame, Remus, that you’ve got so many after you.”

“I know. I’ll call you back when I’ve got a plan set, but right now I’ll keep tailing ‘em.” And with that, Lupin hung up.

Cliff Thomas, you only got half the story right, Lupin thought as he climbed over the rubble towards the exit. *I am racking up a lot of enemies – but the real pity is that most of them used to be old friends.*

Chapter 6

“You should have told me that it would feel this bad,” Malfoy complained, shooting a scathing glare at Nicci. “My head feels like it’s going to explode, and I can’t remember anything. *Anything*, Nicci. By Merlin, I hope I didn’t say anything stupid in front of you.”

“You mean more than the usual?” Ginny asked innocently, as she combed out her streaked hair by the mirror in the corner. Malfoy threw her a dangerous glare.

Nicci yawned as she pulled on her jacket – it was drizzling again, and thick muggy clouds hung over London. She casually swept the room with her eyes, all the while looking for possible security vulnerabilities. She had dished out the extra money to get a two-bedroom suite (three beds and the couch) – despite the extra cost, she knew that it would prove worthwhile, considering how much easier a single room was to protect. Plus, it came equipped with a small kitchenette, and the less that they interacted with the Muggle world, the better.

Yet even despite all this, she couldn’t quite shake the feeling that they were being watched or monitored somehow. *I didn’t kill our stalker last night, but I got a measure of him. He’s trying to keep us under surveillance – and he’s not doing a good job.*

Harry stepped out of the small bathroom and shook out his black hair. He was wearing a Muggle T-shirt, baggy jeans, and sneakers – a simple outfit that Nicci automatically approved of. *He’ll be invisible in all cases. He’s not remarkable at all. Perfect.*

“So what’s for breakfast?” Harry asked brightly.

“Nothing for me,” Malfoy groaned as he struggled into a shirt. “My stomach’s in a bit of an unsteady state. Damn it, Nicci, how many did I drink?”

“More than you should have, in any case. Let’s just say be thankful that the bar was wrecked – otherwise, *you’d* be paying the tab.” She stood up, and quickly poured herself a mug of coffee. Downing it in

two gulps, she tossed the remote over to Ginny. “Turn on the TV. I want to catch the local news.”

Ginny looked blank as she picked up the remote. “What’s this?”

“It’s called a ‘remote controller’,” Nicci explained, rolling her eyes. “Just press the big red button – it generally goes straight to the local news.”

Ginny nodded and pointed the remote at the TV and, with incredible concentration, punched the red button. Immediately the screen lit up with a Muggle newscaster. Nicci’s gaze went to the bottom of the screen. *BBC. Good. I might be able to get something worthwhile.*

“And in local news, there has been another incident of gang violence last night. The fire department and police are investigating a mysterious detonation at a London nightclub. Jameson, on the scene, has more.” The female newscaster almost seemed emotionless as clips of the smoking rubble came on the scene.

Malfoy turned to glare at Nicci. “You did all that?”

Nicci shrugged. “And if I did? It wouldn’t have been the first time.”

“You’re lucky that nobody got seriously hurt, and that the club was evacuated on time,” Harry said with a scowl. “That explosion could have killed a lot of people.”

“Why do you think I pulled the fire alarm, Potter?” Nicci snapped back. “Gunfire won’t make people run anymore. But yell ‘Fire!’ or ‘Cops!’ and you’ll have patrons scrambling for the exits. It’s ironic, but it’s the truth.”

“Hold on, I want to hear what this guy’s saying,” Ginny interrupted, trying to shush the argument. She punched another one of the buttons on the remote – amazingly, the right one – and the volume slightly increased, making the man’s voice audible above the argument.

“...Police are advising the populace of London to watch for criminals, likely members of the Ash-Born gang. An anonymous tip suggests

that members of this gang were present in the nightclub and were initially responsible for the quarrel that erupted there. Back to you, Stacy.”

Nicci took the remote from Ginny and lowered the volume a bit. She maintained outward calm, but inside, she was seething with fury. *Shammer lied to me – and I don’t like people who lie to me. Typically, they don’t like the results either.* “We’ve got problems.”

“Really? I never would have guessed that,” Malfoy spat sardonically. “You know, it would have all been so much easier if you were straight with us from the start, you know.”

“A good commander never reveals all her tactics, brother,” Nicci hissed through gritted teeth. “Or all her assets. I suggest you remember that.”

“But you aren’t the commander, Nicci, and despite the fact you *assumed* the role, you aren’t technically the one in charge,” Harry pointed out sternly. “We do have a right to input and make plans. So far, everything you told us has made sense. But last night was a disaster – you can’t really deny that.”

“That wasn’t my fault!” Nicci snapped furiously. “Someone is stalking us – badly, but still following us. He attempted to kill Ginny last night, so I shot at him with a silenced bullet. I missed – it happens occasionally – and all hell broke loose. I don’t know who he is, but he’s a threat, and somehow he needs to be taken out of the picture.”

“Could he possibly have recognized us?” Ginny asked, switching off the television. “I mean, although it’s been ten years, one of our friends –”

“Or enemies,” Malfoy added darkly.

“Could have recognized us. They could be following us, and since they don’t remember us entirely too well, they might consider us imposters. That might be the reason why that stalker was shooting.”

“Shooting first and asking questions later?” Harry asked, scratching his temple. “That’s not Order policy. Not really Ministry policy either. And that only means...”

“Don’t draw conclusions without basis, Potter,” Nicci warned. “You don’t know that it was a Death Eater. You have no proof of that. Given the date, what are the odds that Death Eaters are even out of Azkaban yet, even the most minor ones? Not likely.”

“Could be an escaped one,” Ginny muttered. “We all know Azkaban’s not perfect.”

“Or it could be Rookwood,” Malfoy spoke up, picking up his knife from the bedside table and shoving it in his pocket. “In fact, it makes the most sense that it was him. Who else would recognize us? Who else would be able to follow us so well? Who else would even have knowledge that we’re in this time period?”

Nicci thought for a few seconds. “I... I don’t think that it’s Rookwood.”

Malfoy was incensed. “Aren’t you willing to even consider my suggestion? I’m not as idiotic as you might think –”

“He didn’t fight like a Death Eater,” Nicci snapped back. “Where were the Killing Curses? Where was the collateral damage? Where was the dozens of murdered Muggles who got in the way? He didn’t do any of it. If anything, the person who did the most damage was *me!*”

“You know, that’s probably not something you should be bragging about...”

“The fact remains, Potter, that we can’t automatically draw the comforting conclusion that it was a Death Eater without more evidence,” Malfoy said sharply as he took a fortifying gulp of hot tea and gasped slightly as it burned his throat. “We need to get back into the wizarding world, and preferably as soon as possible.”

“And how do you suppose we do that?” Nicci said caustically. “At the moment, the only wizard we’ve had the misfortune to encounter was trying to attack us!” *Malfoy’s first real encounter with the wizarding*

world is a hangover, she thought to herself sardonically, *and now he wants out. Typical.*

“Let’s go to Grimmauld Place first,” Harry said, running his hand through his already mussed hair, “and from there, we can get to Diagon Alley more easily. It shouldn’t be hard – in fact, if Kreacher is still alive, we could probably have a decent meal too.”

Nicci shivered, despite herself. Although it was a fact of her former lifestyle that deaths happened periodically, it still felt eerie to wonder if people she once knew were still alive, simply because a decade had passed.

“Do we get a car or take the Underground?” Malfoy asked, unsteadily getting to his feet.

“Underground would probably be better,” Harry replied, pulling a few spare euros out of his sweat shirt pocket from last night. “I took the Underground from Grimmauld Place to the Ministry once, and I should be able to trace things from there.”

“Good, then let’s get going,” Nicci said, picking up her knife and sliding it into her pocket. She also buckled one of her Uzis onto her belt, and pulled on her jacket. It was just long enough to conceal the weapon – it wouldn’t do to be stopped by police for possessing a submachine gun – especially one with ballistics that directly matched those in the bar she wrecked.

But even as she left, she felt uneasy. *Something is not right here. I can feel it...*

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Lupin tensed as he saw the four, more or less the same for wear, leave the lobby of the hotel. He rubbed his eyes as he watched them leave. Flicking his wand under the table, he tried again to put a Tracing Hex on them, but again, the magic failed.

Guess I’m going to have to follow on foot, he thought as he left the hotel with short, easy strides, not letting them out of his sight. Even though the sight of the two females caused the bile to rise in his

mouth, he controlled his fury. He had to know what was going on. He had to know their mission, their plan.

And after everything they'd done, he wasn't about to let them get away this time.

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It didn't take long for Harry to retrace his steps to Grimmauld Place, and less than a half-hour after leaving the hotel, he stood steps away from Number 11 and Number 13. He smiled and tapped his wand three times on the gate, waiting for the house to inflate between the two.

He expected nothing extraordinary, and he only got half of what he expected.

Nothing happened.

"That's strange," Harry muttered.

"Was that tapping supposed to do anything?" Nicci asked sardonically, leaning against a lamppost. "Because it didn't, you know."

Harry, gritting his teeth, tried again, tapping his wand three times on the gate, and concentrating on the house. Again, nothing happened.

"Harry, there's no point," Ginny said, although the anxiousness was plain in her voice. "It's not coming."

She tapped her wand three times on the gate, and again, nothing happened.

"I'm not seeing much of anything," Malfoy spoke up loudly.

"Shut up, Malfoy," Harry muttered under his breath. Nicci, despite herself, was smiling. She found it mildly entertaining to watch the pretty-boy struggle.

"Maybe we should try it together?" Ginny asked, looking at Harry. "That might produce results."

"We never had to before," Harry replied, a note of panic in his voice. "Something's not right." He stepped into the yard and tapped three times on the post again. Nothing happened.

"You know, I was so expecting it to happen that time," Malfoy said in a stage whisper. Ginny shot him a glare that could have skewered a dragon, and then stepped inside to help Harry.

"Harry... maybe it's not there anymore. Maybe the magic just... dissipated," Ginny said hesitantly. "Sirius' father put the original enchantments on the house – maybe something went wrong with them."

"That house was supposed to be indestructible, Ginny," Harry muttered. "There's no way it could be gone. *No way.*"

With an exasperated sigh, Nicci and Malfoy both drew their wands and stepped inside the courtyard. As Harry bent to tap the post again, both mimicked his motion, but on a different post.

There was a grating rumble, and Harry looked up, startled. Malfoy shot his sister a smug smile.

"It's here! We found..." Harry's voice trailed off as he beheld the scene of utter devastation in front of him.

Between Number 11 and Number 13 was a blackened framework of seared timbers, charred and covered with ash. Even the stone appeared to have melted with the heat. The door was sundered in two, with the serpentine knocker split directly down the middle. From Harry's angle, he could see the entire house – all a charred, miserable wreck.

"Somehow, I don't think this was what you had in mind when you came here," Nicci began carefully, as she watched the anguish on Harry's face. "Did you know it was going to be like this? Did you somehow leave an open flame before you left?"

"Kreacher would have put it out," Ginny replied quietly. "Harry... I'm sorry..."

Harry stepped forward, almost as if he was in a daze. He touched the fragile shaft of broken wood that was the remainder of the doorframe. The soot left black marks on his fingers.

"We should... take a look inside," he said quietly. "We – I – need to find out what happened here..."

"It could have just been a house fire, Potter," Malfoy said mildly as he walked closer. "They do happen on occasion, even in wizarding households."

"Then why didn't anybody repair the house?" Ginny asked sharply. "The enchantments lingering would have made it an ideal place."

"Unless the house was irreparable," Nicci noted, moving closer to scan the ruins. "Certain curses will do that, and in mind, there's only one curse that can deal this much fiery damage quickly."

Malfoy looked at her quickly. "Fiendfyre?"

Nicci nodded tersely. "Likely. We need to find the focal point of the spell. From there, we might be able to retrace it."

"Do you think the focal point is inside this wreck?" Ginny asked, looking with distaste upon the ruins. "It doesn't look safe to be moving around in."

"It *won't* be safe," Nicci said sharply, "so we'll have to be careful. And yes, I do think the focal point's inside. Given the dark magic that was likely stored inside this house..." She shook her head. "Trust me, it won't be hard to find."

Cautiously, she stepped on the charred boards – nearly the only thing left of the floor and began moving down the hallway. Almost unconsciously, she drew her wand and an Uzi as the prickling feeling on the back of her neck returned. *So I didn't kill our stalker after all. Can't be surprised really, though it is interesting that he managed to catch up with us so soon...*

The edge of her boot hit something solid. She looked down and nudged the object with her foot. It appeared to be charred badly, spiked to a large plaque of wood.

A skull.

Ginny pointed with a trembling hand. “Th-those must be the skulls of the house-elves that were nailed to the walls. No human skull is that small.”

“Bloody Blacks,” Malfoy muttered. “Malfoys have more sense.”

Despite herself, Nicci was inclined to agree with her brother. Malfoys practiced an attitude of cold aloofness and typically focused more on political and business aims. The Black family, however, was more focused on blood matters and acquiring magic – nearly always Dark magic. Could something have gone wrong in the house with an experiment after they had left? And if so, what was the experiment – and more importantly, who had done it?

She moved cautiously down the hall and shoved open the charred shard of wood that had passed as the door for the parlor. Staring around the charred room, she grew more perplexed every second. She still couldn’t tell where the focal point of the Fiendfyre curse was – or even if such a curse was used at all.

A short gust of dusty wind blew through the ruins, and Nicci saw the flutter of charred cloth. Her eyes narrowing, she approached the far wall, where the remnants of a massive family tapestry were hung. She sneered with disgust as she looked at the words ornately written onto the blackened fabric: *The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black*.

She sneered with disgust. *‘Most ancient’... and gone, now, for all intents and purposes. Pathetic...* Her eyes traced the slightly melted lines on the tapestry, first alighting on the scorch mark representing Sirius Black.

Suddenly, her eyes narrowed. “Potter, get over here - *now*.”

There was a series of heavy footsteps, and Harry shoved his way into the parlor. “What? What did you find?”

“This,” Nicci said softly, her eyes tracing the lines with growing confusion. Harry stepped forward to take a look, and then stepped back with disgust.

“It’s a family tapestry – traces the family. I’m not on there – I don’t think you are either – but you could probably find your brother, though.”

“That’s the not the pertinent thing now,” Nicci muttered, her eyes fixed right below the scorch mark which represented Sirius. Although the name had been obliterated, the dates remained the same. “You know that these tapestries update themselves via a form of blood magic, right?”

“So?” Harry asked. “It shouldn’t matter. With the Fiendfyre, any magic here would have likely disjoined.”

“Then how are you to explain this?” Nicci pointed down on the fabric at the date. “According to this, Sirius Black has *no death date*! According to this tapestry, *he’s still alive*!”

Harry stiffened, and Nicci could see the muscles in his arms tense. “That’s impossible. I saw him die – he fell through the Veil in the Department of Mysteries.” He briefly told her the story, and Nicci’s eyes narrowed with curiosity and suspicion.

“You said the *Department of Mysteries*?”

“Yes,” Harry replied, a little startled at her intensity. “Why?”

“Nothing, just that it’s awfully curious that your godfather died in the same place where the *oulenkeyne* was. That it’s awfully curious where Rookwood went to hide. That it’s awfully curious that your prophecy was hidden there.”

“I’m not sure I see the connection,” Harry said, his own eyes narrowing now behind his glasses.

“I’m not saying that there is one – but with such coincidences, it’s hard not to notice. It’s hard not to see the possibilities –”

“What are you two arguing about?” a new, sneering voice said from the door. Malfoy shouldered his way into the room and peered down at the tapestry. “Ah, so *this* is the Black family tapestry. Our family has got one too.”

“All the purebloods together,” Ginny hissed, almost like a cat. “Our family couldn’t afford the tapestry, nor did we want one. Not our type of magic.”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “Blood magic isn’t *evil*, Weasley. It might be a bit unsavory for some, but it’s not dark by any stretch. Hell, most healing magic is blood-based.”

“Malfoy,” Harry asked, his voice abruptly tight. “You would be on the tapestry, right?”

The blond boy looked closer. “I should be...”

Harry pointed down at the lines between Narcissa Black and Lucius Malfoy – and a gold line stretching down towards...

A black scorch, identical to the one that had eradicated Sirius’ name. The dates below directly corresponded with Malfoy’s birthdates.

“What did you do, Malfoy,” Harry asked quietly, at the shock of Malfoy’s horrified face, “to offend purebloods everywhere? What did you do to disinherit yourself? When did you become a blood traitor?”

“This can’t be happening...” Malfoy whispered. “Why would I... why would I be off the tapestry? *Blown* off the tapestry? It doesn’t make any sense...”

Ginny leaned closer, her eyes narrowing. “A lot of things don’t make sense about this blasted scrap of fabric, you know. I think maybe the fire caused some aspects of it to malfunction.”

"Magic doesn't work like that, Ginny," Harry said, scratching his temple. Nicci choked back her laughter – just a few days ago, Hermione had told the pretty-boy the same thing.

Ginny's finger stabbed down at the fabric. "Look! Can't you see the inaccuracies? According to this, Sirius is still alive and Malfoy has been disowned – both of which make no sense whatsoever." Her eyes widened as they swept outwards. "And according to this tapestry, Bellatrix Lestrange is still alive as well."

"What?"

Ginny only pointed, and Nicci saw, to her rising shock, that Bellatrix's death date was clearly missing. Yet almost immediately, her shock was replaced with hard resolve. *If this tapestry is accurate, and Bella is somehow alive... well, I'll just finally have my chance to take her down myself.*

"But that doesn't make any sense at all!" Harry argued. "You and I both saw her die, Ginny! As a matter of fact, Nicci and Malfoy probably did too!"

"Actually, I was unconscious before she was killed. A pity, really, because I would have liked to see it," Nicci added with a grimace. She didn't add the thought that she would have liked to have *done* it.

A new disturbing thought jumped to her mind. "You mentioned to me that the Dark Lord had some sort of magical device to keep himself alive?"

"The Horcruxes," Harry replied with a deep frown and an expression of dawning horror. "You don't think –"

Nicci shrugged. "I knew Bellatrix, to some degree. It would be realistic. The chances are high that she actually did."

"She was certainly evil enough," Ginny added thoughtfully.

"Lovely," Malfoy noted snidely. "Just what we need now – to make sure my dear Aunt Bella is truly dead – and we have no idea where to start."

Harry clenched his fist. "If this tapestry isn't lying or broken in some manner, we've got no choice. We can't let her come back. We can't allow Bellatrix Lestrange to have a Horcrux."

Nicci scanned the family tree and her eyes fell upon a single name. "Potter, did your godfather Sirius ever have a brother?"

"Yes," Harry replied, slightly bewildered at the question. "Why? He died before I was born, stealing one of Voldemort's Horcruxes."

"Not according to this," Nicci said softly.

"*WHAT?*"

"Yep," Nicci said with a deep sigh. "According to this tapestry – which I am *really* hoping is broken – your godfather's brother might not be as dead as Sirius professed. According to this, Regulus Black is alive."

--

Lupin crept closer, his eyes narrowed as he watched the group enter the very familiar courtyard. He had been to Grimmauld Place with old friends several times, and he had been there...

He saw the ruins slide into visibility, and he was shocked at the grey ashes that now smothered the charred wreckage. Fragments of magic held the house together, and Lupin saw the shattered beams suspended by magic in the charred ruin.

Drawing his wand, he stepped onto the garden path and remembered...

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Lupin sat in the Headquarters, idly scratching the back of his neck as he turned the pages of the Daily Prophet. He winced as he saw the new list of deaths caused by the Death Eaters. Almost subconsciously, he scanned it with his eyes, seeing if he recognized any names. As he reached the bottom, he sighed, almost

subconsciously. Nobody today, he thought with a chill, but you never know about tomorrow...

The door flew open with a startling bang, and Lupin was on his feet in a second. In an instant, he wondered why his Secrecy Sensors didn't go off, but then he recognized the figures moving into the sitting-room.

"Remus!" Alastor Moody exclaimed with relief, and Lupin was astonished at the panic on the Auror's face. "Thank Merlin you're still here! We need bandages and alcohol now, or else he's not going to make it!"

"Who are you talking about –" Lupin began, but Dumbledore, who had just swept into the room with a terrible fury on his face, silenced him in a second. Moody had come in with a wounded man who had dark hair and dark eyes. He was bleeding – badly – from several gaping slashes across his chest, back, and arms. Any breath came with a froth of blood to his lips. As Lupin moved closer with a roll of linen and a bottle of alcohol, he recognized the injured man.

"Severus Snape –"

"There's no time left to explain, Remus," Dumbledore said, in a quiet voice that stifled all comments. "Severus has been wounded badly, and we had to get him here as quickly as possible. Most of the wounds are cursed – we can't heal them magically – so we have to use any field medication we have, and considering that Hogwarts is not safe at the moment, we had no choice but to bring him here."

"What happened at Hogwarts?" Lupin gasped as he handed the bandages to Kingsley Shacklebolt, who hastily began wrapping them around the wounded man's chest. "Has Voldemort –"

Most of the people in the room winced, but Dumbledore only shook his head, his expression grave. "I have reason to believe he will attack the school soon. Severus was targeted last night by Bellatrix Lestrange, and he barely got up to the school from his house in Hogsmeade in time. Then, contrary to my objections, he went to his home at Spinner's End this afternoon." Dumbledore shook his head. "It didn't turn out well at all."

Lupin tensed. "Who was there waiting for him?"

"All the Lestranges were there," Kingsley said harshly. "I followed Snape on Dumbledore's orders – even though he said at Hogwarts that he was through with Voldemort, we couldn't risk a double-cross, so I followed him. And it was a damned good thing I did. Snape was being tortured when I burst in and if it wasn't for some of the most vicious spellwork that I've ever done, both of us would be dead. They attacked us again in transit back to Hogsmeade, and so we had to take him here."

"You're taking an awful risk here, Dumbledore," Moody growled. "This man's a Death Eater."

"After what we both heard last night, Alastor, you know that fact's irrelevant," Dumbledore replied quietly. "With the Legilimency was done on Severus –"

"You can't trust an Occlumens like him, Dumbledore," Kingsley said softly, "without more substantial proof. What did he tell you?"

Dumbledore opened his mouth to speak, but before he could utter a single word, the side door banged open. Three figures charged in, all wearing torn and disheveled robes. Lupin's eyes lit up at the sight of his friends, but then fell at the expression of sheer panic on their faces.

"We've got more problems, Remus... Dumbledore! You're here! Perfect, I'll only have to say this once," James Potter began quickly, pacing automatically and taking a quick glance down at the man. "Merlin's beard, what happened to the poor fellow here..."

Lily Potter's face went white as she saw the man lying on the crude stretcher. "Severus..." She stepped forward, but James grabbed her wrist, rage already evident on his face.

"What is he doing here, Dumbledore? He's a Death Eater! He's a spy!"

"He's switched sides at great personal risk, James," Dumbledore replied with a hint of exasperation, "and I expect you to treat him with

the degree of courtesy you'd give me. I heard most of his story in my office last night, and unfortunately, we don't have time to relate to you the whole sordid tale. In any case, that's clearly not the reason you're here. Let Alastor and Kingsley deal with Severus while you tell me what's been happening. The Prophet's behind the times, I know that, but have you heard any news from Hogsmeade? What is Crouch preparing to do about the threat Voldemort has made there?"

"Hogsmeade doesn't matter right now, Dumbledore!" Sirius Black said, a real edge of panic in his voice. His robes were the worst for wear of the group. "I got a letter from my brother Regulus."

Dumbledore froze, and his rain-soaked robes seemed to crystallize around him. "If I remember correctly, Regulus was reported dead a year ago. I was at his funeral, and so were you, albeit in disguise. Was this a late notice?"

Sirius shook his head of thick black hair furiously, drenching the entire group in rainwater. "He's alive, Dumbledore."

"He can't be."

"He is, Dumbledore. I've seen him myself. He's double-crossed Voldemort – big-time. We met him outside York with Lily, James, and a few others, but the Death Eaters caught up to us. We're lucky to be alive."

Dumbledore's eyes narrowed. "Are you all right? Was Voldemort there?"

"That's the worst of it," James spoke up, his eyes blazing with a panic rarely seen in the confident Gryffindor. "We got out to the West Country all right and went over the Prewetts, but things over there... Voldemort and the Death Eaters had hit the place in full force. We barely got out of there alive. Thank God Molly was with Arthur Weasley, otherwise it would have been a catastrophe. All those boys would have been left motherless."

"What about Gideon and Fabian?" Dumbledore asked. "Are they all right?"

James put his hand to his face. Lily just bowed her head, tears trickling down her face. "They went out like heroes," she whispered. "It took five Death Eaters to bring them down. Dolohov got the kills."

Grief seemed to penetrate Dumbledore's frozen face at that second, and he looked very much like a tired war veteran dragged back into the fighting. "I'm sorry to hear that. Does Molly know yet?"

"We haven't had time, Dumbledore," Sirius snarled, his fists clenched. "Regulus betrayed the Death Eaters, and they're after him in force. Voldemort's with 'em. I tried to get him to come with us, but he said he wanted to go back to Grimmauld Place first! He'll be there any minute, and you can bet that my beloved parents won't be keen to acknowledge my brother's new sympathies."

"Orion Black's only gotten worse with age," Lupin spat with a curse that didn't often leave the werewolf's lips. "Damn it, you're right, Sirius. We need to get him out of Grimmauld Place before Orion calls the Malfoys and Lestranges."

"Or before the house is leveled," James added darkly.

Dumbledore was silent for a few seconds, and then nodded stiffly. "I can't be with you on this one – I need to get back to Hogwarts to deal with the threats on the school and Hogsmeade. The odds are high that there will be an attack soon. And I was supposed to have an interview with Sybil Trelawney for the Divination teaching position, and she never showed up today. I have a bad feeling about that."

"Wasn't she supposed to be staying at the Hog's Head?" James asked, shaking out his cloak over Lupin's fire grate. "I helped arrange that! Where is she?"

"In this particular clime, I can't be sure," Dumbledore replied, with a small shrug of his shoulders. "I fear the worst. But that is not the point. James, Sirius, Lily... please be extremely careful if you're going to Grimmauld Place. None of you are welcome there."

"I'm going too, Albus," Lupin said softly, drawing on his cloak. "For some reason, things don't seem quite right here..."

"Damn right they don't," Moody spat. "Trelawney vanishes, Snape double-crosses the Death Eaters and nearly gets killed, and somehow Regulus Black returns from the dead. None of this makes sense at all, Remus! I should come with you to the house."

"I need you, Alastor, to stay here with Kingsley and look after Severus until I can get Madam Pomfrey here," Dumbledore said quietly. "The four of them can handle it – it might even be wise to pick up Peter on the way."

"He's out with a bad fever right now," Lily interjected with a grimace. "We'll go alone."

"Then can we go?" Sirius snarled, nearly jumping up and down with nervous anger. "I lost Regulus once – I don't want to lose him again!"

Almost as one, they spun on their heels and Disapparated, appearing on a grimy street. As Sirius yanked the gate open, the dark house seemed to inflate between numbers eleven and thirteen. It held a strange air to it – almost as if the grandeur it had had years earlier had rotted away slowly, leaving nothing but a shell behind...

"Come on, Remus!" James shouted. "We need to stick together!" James had entered the desiccated yard and Sirius was already at the door. Drawing his wand, the dark-haired wizard tapped the door twice. There was a clink of a chain, and with a heavy kick, Sirius forced the door open. Already Lupin could hear shouting coming from downstairs.

"You have no idea of the danger you've placed upon us –"

"Father, I don't give a damn about the danger for you right now – I need the locket! Kreacher! Kreacher, get over here, I need it!" Regulus Black's voice was clearly audible over the distance, and in one smooth motion, they all drew their wands. Regulus sounded dangerously disturbed – almost mad...

"I'm taking the lead," Sirius whispered, moving to the front, holding his wand like a knife. Lupin began to protest, but the look on James' face immediately halted the objection. They had both been there when Sirius had burst in at the Potter Manor a few summers earlier, ragged

and dirty, with the news that he'd ran away. This is likely the first time that Sirius has been back since he left, Lupin thought suddenly. Sirius had never talked about what had been said on the day he left, but Sirius could only assume that bad blood had been spilt that day.

"He shouldn't be going first," Lily whispered, barely out of Sirius' earshot.

"I know that, Lily, but there's nothing that we can do," Lupin whispered back, the tension straining his voice. "Sirius needs to do this –"

There was a loud crack, and Sirius halted abruptly at the base of the stairs to the kitchen. A new voice, a guttural croak, came up the stairs.

"Master Regulus! You're alive! How –"

"It doesn't matter now, Kreacher. Give me the locket."

"Regulus, what is that locket?" Orion Black's baritone rumbled. "Kreacher showed up with it after you vanished, and he's been in a right state, as have your mother and I. Do you realize what you put us through?"

"Believe me, Father, if I had managed to get out of that hellhole earlier, I would have. But right now, I need to destroy this before the Death Eaters come calling –"

"So they are on the way! What did you do to displease the Dark Lord?"

"I took one of his most prized possessions, and he knows that I have knowledge of his secret," Regulus hissed. Lupin crept a little closer to the stairs – Sirius was already halfway down, hidden in the shadows against the wall. He could suddenly see Regulus in the faint candlelight, and he could not withstand gasping. The younger Black looked terrible – his hair was streaked with filth, and his once handsome face was criss-crossed with bloody lines. Lupin could already tell that some were likely infected. But there was something in the former Death Eater that Lupin had never seen before – his eyes gleamed with triumph, an edgy sort of satisfaction laced with vengeful

feelings. Lupin was perplexed – what had sparked this change in the normally icy Regulus Black?

Orion Black took a step forward. He was an enormous man, but unlike the Goyle or Crabbe families, the elder Black's girth only gave shelter to a brilliant mind. The older wizard had once been one of the most powerful pure-blood patriarchs in England, and even in advanced age, his dark eyes blazed with intellect and magical power.

"I cannot have you endanger this family, Regulus, and you know that would do that if you shame or displease the Dark Lord, that would happen. Whatever object you have, you must return to the Dark Lord and leave immediately."

Regulus let out a raucous laugh that echoed eerily in the dim kitchen light. "That's not happening, Father. If anything, it's getting destroyed – right here, right now. Kreacher, the locket."

The old house elf, sliding out from behind Regulus, handed the younger Black the locket. Lupin's eyes narrowed as he saw the object – why would Voldemort care so much about something so small?

The Black patriarch also stepped forward. "Give it to me, Regulus. I can't have you endanger the family. Do you realize that Narcissa and Bellatrix have married Death Eaters –"

"Serves 'em right," Regulus said with a shrug. "And Bella's a Death Eater all by herself, but that's not the point. I don't care right now about them. I don't care much about anything, only about this." In a flash, Regulus had his wand in his hand, and it was pointing directly at his father. "And you're not going to stop me."

"Regulus, no!" a voice shouted. Lupin swore under his breath as both Blacks turned to see Sirius coming down the stairs. Sirius wore an easy smile, but Lupin knew instantly that it was a mask. "Look, we can all work this out, between us."

"I thought I made it very clear to you that you weren't allowed in the house again, blood traitor," Orion Black growled, drawing his own wand now. "And you've brought your filthy little friends too – the werewolf, a Mudblood, and the Potter brat."

Lily angled her wand directly at Orion, her cheeks flushed with anger. "Never call me that, Mr. Black. Otherwise I might do something that I'd regret later."

"Is that a threat?" the senior Black growled.

"No, it's a promise," James replied seriously. "We just been through one hell of a day, and we just saw a few friends of ours get killed by your Death Eater friends. We're exhausted, sore, and in a really bad mood, so it would probably be for your best interest not to piss us off."

"How dare you –"

"It would be best that you shut up now, Father," Sirius hissed dangerously, pointing his wand at Orion Black. "I still haven't forgotten what you tried to do to me before I left. It would be best if you surrendered now – I don't want to be committing patricide."

"Sirius, you can't –"

"Moony, it's not the time to be giving me advice about this!" Sirius snarled, his wand still firmly fixed on his father. "Regulus, you have your locket, and if the Death Eaters are on the way, you need to get to a safe house –"

"Not yet, Sirius, the locket must be destroyed," Regulus replied evenly, but there was a slight quiver of anxious eagerness in his voice. "And it must be destroyed here, in the foundation place of all the lies behind it." He set it on the table carefully – a table that shook with the shattering of the front door upstairs.

"Death Eaters!" James swore, turning back towards the stairs. "Lily and I will hold them off, but get Regulus and that damned locket out of here – from the sounds of it, they brought in an army!"

Orion Black raised his wand, a fearful glint in his eyes. "I can't have you endanger my home, Regulus – and this is your final warning –" But the youngest Black wasn't even listening

"Kreacher, run now and never come back to this house, do you understand me? Get out of here, and that's an order! GO!" At the

sound of his master's furious voice, Kreacher, his ancient eyes wide and fearful, bolted.

Sirius shifted his wand's aim over to Regulus. "What the hell are you going to –"

But Regulus wasn't listening. He put his wand to the locket on the table and said three short words, spitting them, almost as if they left a bad taste in his mouth. Lupin recognized the words, and he recoiled in horror – he knew those words.

"Daemonis...infernale...INCENDIUM!"

Lupin knew he had seconds to act. Pointing his wand at Regulus, he bellowed, "ACCIO REGULUS!" The youngest Black flew towards him, only to be seized by a horrified Sirius. The Black patriarch could only stare at the seared spot on the table, where the locket rolled, split cleanly in two.

But the conflagration that Regulus had unleashed was far from over. White-hot flames began to rise from the smoldering timbers of the table, beginning to take the shapes of dragons and serpents and chimaeras...

"Dear Merlin, son," Orion Black whispered in horror, not even raising his wand to confront the hellish display in front of him, "what have you done? You've doomed us..."

But that was the most Lupin could hear, as the flames engulfed the Black patriarch in a single searing blast. Regulus screamed in anguish and pain, but Sirius, pinioning his younger brother's arms at his sides, hauled the struggling ex-Death Eater up the stairs, Lupin hot on his heels.

But upstairs was hardly better than the flames downstairs – the Death Eaters had arrived in full force, and James and Lily were dueling for their lives. Lupin barely dodged a Killing Curse that streaked past his temple.

But out of the tumult, Lupin could hear Lucius Malfoy roar, "Someone's activated Fiendfyre and MAXIMIZED the curse – abort now!"

"But the Dark Lord SAID –" the scream of Bellatrix Lestrange cut through the fighting, but Lucius' howl interrupted her.

"He was NOT counting on this, and HE'S the only one who can stop it! NOW GET THE HELL OUT OR WE'RE ALL DEAD! NOW!" Lupin had never heard Lucius sound so deranged and panicked, but in a second he understood – Grimmauld Place was one of the most infamous storehouses of Dark Magic other than Gringotts itself, and as Lucius had frequented the house, he undoubtedly knew what else the Fiendfyre could activate...

It began like a chain reaction, as the Fiendfyre in the cavernous kitchen below finally reached the floor of the main hall. The heat itself was suffocating, but Lupin knew of the real danger. Everyone was fleeing for their lives, but there was not enough room at the front door to let all the Death Eaters and Order members out...

Another Killing Curse shot past, nearly hitting Sirius this time. Sirius frantically tried to draw his wand, but he himself was hindered by a struggling Regulus. With an impatient motion, Sirius threw his brother off, and shot a Blasting Curse at the deranged Death Eater that was still fighting.

"NO! REGULUS! NO!"

James had bellowed the words, but it was Lupin who saw the disaster – Sirius' impatient motion had deposited Regulus directly into the line of the raging Fiendfyre. The youngest Black began to scream as his flesh began to char and blacken, his clothes beginning to ignite...

Lupin looked around wildly, looking for Sirius, but the older Black was already gone – a massive hole in the house indicated where he went. Lupin couldn't believe it – Sirius wouldn't have left his younger brother to die...

In a second, Lupin made his choice. Ignoring the searing heat, he surrendered to the animal senses that were characteristic of a

werewolf. The heat – along with the pain – was gone, replaced with instinctive purpose. With hands that seemed to move impossibly fast, he seized the flailing Regulus by the throat, flung his burning body over his shoulder, turned, and charged, aiming straight for the gaping hole in the wall.

There was a shatter of scorched timbers, a roar of flames, and Lupin tumbled out onto the soaked grass. The rain was coming down harder than ever, but simple rain would not be enough to extinguish the terrible flames spreading across Regulus' back.

Seemingly out of thin air, Lily appeared. Her hair was tousled, and her robes were shredded and charred, but she seemed unhurt. She pointed her wand at the flames that still engulfed Regulus and slashed it, twice, violently. Almost as quickly as they had moved, the Fiendfyre flames were gone.

“We need to get him medical attention –” Lily yelled to James. “Get St. Mungo’s to get down here now! These burns won’t heal normally!”

James didn’t reply to Lily’s words, but only watched, transfixed, as the flames finally exploded through the windows of the Black house, making it look like nothing more than a flaming skull, capped with hellfire – a grotesque new Dark Mark. Already, the Muggle houses around it were beginning to burn, and Lupin could hear the screams. The police will be coming, Lupin thought suddenly, with the firemen. But they won’t be able to stop this. Nobody can. Nobody except...

It was almost as if Lupin called him to the spot. With a flash of white phoenix fire, he was there. The thin wizard, his blue eyes blazing with fury, pointed his wand at the hellish fire and etched a complicated symbol into the air. Almost as if the fires had never started, the Fiendfyre vanished.

For a second, Lupin began to breathe easier, but then he saw Dumbledore running towards them, an expression of panic on his face that Lupin had never seen before, gesturing wildly for them to get down –

Lupin, grabbing Lily, dove for the ground as Number 12, Grimmauld Place exploded.

It was an instant of blinding pain as the searing red-white light lit the darkened sky, and then a few more seconds of agony as the explosion's sound roared over them. The firestorm followed a second later, searing over their heads and starting a dozen other fires along the street.

But, almost as soon as it had begun, it was over. Lupin, shaking his head to clear his ears – it took him a little longer, given that he had sharpened his senses to high sensitivity – but he finally regained control. Fighting down the beast within, he gazed wildly around.

Almost like an apparition, Dumbledore was at Lupin and Lily's side. He had tackled James to save his life, and already he was bending over the other two Aurors and checking Regulus.

"How did you –" Lupin began, but Lily interrupted him.

"We need to get Regulus to St. Mungo's, these burns need magical healing!"

"St. Mungo's is compromised," Dumbledore replied, a note of icy calm in his voice that sent a chill down Lupin's spine. "He would be dead within an hour of his arrival, euthanized by the traitors that Voldemort has planted in the hospital. Besides, he's going into cardiac arrest – Apparition would kill him. The Muggles called the ambulances as before the explosion, and so did I. There hasn't been a conflagration like this since the Great London Fire nearly a century ago." Dumbledore looked up as James skidded on the wet grass towards them.

"Dumbledore! How did – what did you do?" he sputtered, his horrified gaze going to the flaming timbers that made up what was left of Grimmauld Place.

"There's only one way to disjoin a spell like that," Dumbledore said heavily, wiping his eyes, "and that is to cut it at the source. I don't know how Regulus knew how to maximize a spell like that, but that's the only way to break it." He sighed. "I've had to break a spell like that when I faced Grindelwald – and believe me, it was not pretty to see." He stood quickly. "I cannot be seen here – I'm sorry – I must get back to Hogwarts – we are in far more danger than we've ever realized..."

“Wait! You can’t –” Lily began, but he had already Disappeared.

It was if everything had broken at once. Lily dissolved into tears. James then proceeded to call Dumbledore several names that would never be deemed complimentary, and despite himself, Lupin was inclined to agree with his friend. Never before had Dumbledore abandoned them like this. And the stakes were far higher now...

The sirens roared, and almost as if they were Summoned, four ambulances skidded to a stop on the street, followed by three fire engines and three police cars. They emptied in a second, and all the police had their weapons drawn, but it was almost as if they didn’t even know where to start...

“OVER HERE!” Lily screamed. “WE HAVE A BADLY-INJURED MAN HERE! HELP! HE’S GOING INTO CARDIAC ARREST! HELP!” The paramedics dashed over, and with a professionalism that Lupin never expected of Muggles, heaved him onto a stretcher.

“It’s a fuckin’ miracle he’s survived this long,” one of the paramedics muttered as he strapped the youngest Black down to the spinal board. “He’s lost so much blood... burned nearly all over his body...”

“I’ll go with him,” Lily said, tears streaking through the soot on her face.

“What are you, his wife?”

“She’s my wife,” James snarled, “and he’s a friend. Lily, go with him. Remus and I will deal with the Mug... the police.”

“Damn right you’re going to deal with us,” a man in Muggle combat gear said with a snarl. “Let the girl go, Clive. This one’s going to explain how the hell half the district’s on fire! What the fuck were you idiots building in that house? And how the hell did you get out alive?”

“Chemical explosion,” Lupin muttered, getting to his feet. “Nothing we did – bunch of criminals broke in and set off a bomb. They cut and ran, but not before we nearly got incinerated.”

“Convenient,” the officer said, and with that, James finally lost his temper.

“Do you really think we’d tell you this if we were responsible? One of our friends nearly got fucking killed – do you honestly think we’d do this? Do we look like criminals or terrorists?”

Lupin winced – James should not have mentioned terrorists. The police man’s face darkened even further in the flickering light of the fires and the pounding rain. Lupin, despite his own dire situation, sympathized with the man – already Muggles were filling the streets. Lupin heard the shatter of windows and a loud whoop. “Looks like Devil’s Night has come early!”

“Son of a bitch,” the officer swore, a second before he heard a loud bang. Lupin winced – one of the Muggle’s weapons must have discharged. What had started as a wizarding conflict had – once again – escalated into a disaster that affected both worlds.

Suddenly, out of the darkness, a new, tall figure appeared out of the darkness. Despite his haggard appearance, he appeared distinctly less charred than Lupin or James. The werewolf’s eyes narrowed – he knew that figure.

“James! Remus!” Sirius shouted as he shoved his way past the surprised police. “Dear Merlin, what the hell happened here? It looks like something out of hell – there’s a fucking riot erupting with the Muggles down the street – no doubt the Death Eaters instigated it – and now with all the fires –”

“Wait a second, who the hell are you?” the officer roared. “I want that man detained for questioning along with these two – they obviously know something!”

But Lupin no longer cared what the police officer said, or that other officers were descending upon them. White-hot rage filled him instead, as he clenched his fist. Then, with one smooth motion, he punched Sirius squarely across the face.

There was no sound for a few seconds, as Sirius staggered from the hit – he was used to being in scraps, but a werewolf was typically

much stronger than a human. And Lupin, who had gone through full Auror combat training, was strong for a werewolf.

There were a few wolf-whistles from a passing car, as a group of rowdy young men gave Lupin mock salutes as they drove by. He didn't respond, only watched as Sirius wiped the blood from his mouth and nose.

Finally, Sirius spoke, his voice ragged. "Dear Merlin, Moony, what the hell did I do to you? What the hell..."

"You left Regulus to die in the fire when the going got bad. Did you even get the Death Eater you were chasing?" Lupin asked, not an ounce of anger in his voice. He might have been asking for the weather.

"He Disapparated."

"Typical. So typical. So you run and leave us all to die."

"I didn't leave you to die," Sirius replied heatedly. "I was coming back _"

"All too late, as you probably realized. You tend to run from your problems, don't you, Padfoot, especially when the going gets bad, like tonight? How are you going to justify leaving your younger brother behind this time?" Lupin's voice was filled with scorn. "You ran away from them before, and you haven't stopped. When do you think it'll break through your thick skull that you're going to have to stop running, Sirius?"

"I wasn't running –"

"You left him to DIE!" Lupin growled. " You left us ALL to die! You filthy coward. Couldn't deal with Severus yourself, so you double-teamed him with James. Couldn't deal with your family, so you ran away. Couldn't deal with women at all, so you only fucked them and ran! Your brother at least had the guts to come back – he's a better man than you ever were!"

James' face had gone white, and the rain streaked down his black hair. "Remus, you can't mean that... calm down, Moony, it's the wolf speaking, not you."

"Oh, I think it is Remus talking here," Sirius hissed, stepping forward, his own hands clenched in fists. "Too cowardly to hit me when my guard's up, Moony? Afraid that I might hit back? Afraid that I might actually be stronger than you?" He raised his hands. "Come on, werewolf. Take your best shot."

Lupin didn't hesitate. He launched himself at Sirius, and began throwing punches. A second later, he was in the hands of the police officer and James. He fought wildly, but it only took a few seconds for them to lock handcuffs around his wrists. Howling in fury, he could only struggle as the police tried to haul him to one of the cars.

He looked up through his hair and saw James standing next to Sirius, helping the other Marauder wipe blood from his face. The Black was a mess, and Lupin felt a surge of savage pleasure.

"SO THAT'S THE SIDE YOU CHOOSE, JAMES!" Lupin roared. "FINE! IT'S OVER! I QUIT!" Leaning forward, he rammed the heel of his boot into a sensitive area of the police man holding him, and when the man recoiled, Lupin spun on his heels and Disapparated with a crack.

He reappeared in a darkened London alley close to Diagon Alley. He swore as he clawed his wand from his pocket. After struggling to pull it from his pocket, he reversed it and struck the handcuffs, which burst into two charred pieces.

Free from the restraints, he wiped the blood from his face. He knew he looked a mess, and the rain wasn't helping, but he didn't care. Crushing despair filled him as the horrid truth filled his mind.

The Circle of Marauders had been broken. His friends – his only friends – were gone. For the first time in nearly nine years, he was alone.

A car skidded to a stop by the alley, and he could hear harsh rock music. "...I look inside myself and see my heart is black...I see my

red door and it has been painted black...Maybe then I'll fade away and not have to face the facts...It's not easy facin' up when your whole world is black..."

Lupin shivered and wiped a tear from his eye, as the frigid rain ran down his scorched and ruined robes. It wasn't painted black, he realized. It was charred.

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"Look, we can't just waste time staring at a tapestry," a female voice snapped from the rubble of Grimmauld Place. "Let's check out what's left of the cellar."

In a flash, Lupin's mind clicked back to the present. He tensed with anxiousness. It was time to make a move. He would strike hard and fast. Angling his wand into a combat position, he advanced towards the rubble.

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"Careful on the stairs – the wet ashes are slick," Harry called.

"And you thought I didn't notice," Nicci muttered, shoving her hair out of her eyes as she slid the last meter down the melted stairs. Unconsciously, she drew her wand and an Uzi and swept the room.

What once was the kitchen was now a scene of total devastation. Not a scrap of furniture remained, and even the stone walls were seared black and melted.

A glimmer of gold caught Nicci's eyes, and she slowly approached the center of the room, her Uzi angled cautiously at the object. It was smudged and dark, but she could discern the rough shape of the charred object lodged in the shattered floor.

"Did you find something?" Harry called, skidding down the ruined stairs, Ginny right behind him.

"Yeah... the focal point of the Fiendfyre – and this," Nicci muttered, peeling the rough chain of the object out of the stone. It was the

remains of a locket, split directly down the middle, with a dark line of melted emeralds tracing an 'S'...

Harry went rigid. "*That* shouldn't be here."

"There are plenty of things that shouldn't be here," Malfoy added in an undertone, rubbing his jaw. "The Blacks tended to have a reputation for that."

"This should be in the Forest of Dean!" Harry said heatedly. "Ron destroyed it there with Gryffindor's sword. What on earth is it doing here, looking like this?"

"I think I should ask the same question about all of you," a quiet, yet ominously familiar voice said, directly behind them. They turned as one to see a lone wizard, garbed in black robes. His hood was drawn, and his hair was thinning badly. Thin white scars seamed his face and bare arms, but he was recognizable in a second – at least to Harry, Ginny, and Malfoy, who had all been taught by the man in their third year at Hogwarts.

"Now I think you all better start answering questions before I start killing people," Remus Lupin said coolly. "And I won't hesitate to do so – especially

Chapter 7

The room was cavernous, with vaulted ceilings and chill obsidian walls. Massive ebon pillars rose to the heights of the ceiling, which was a black pit, devoid of light. Yet somehow, there was light in the room – a pale green, the color of diseased flesh. Cold and cheerless, it gave no warmth.

A single chair, etched with fantastically carved figures, sat in the center of the room. It was occupied by a single hooded figure. Wearing simple black robes, the figure idly traced the carvings with a single finger. He casually beheld the blond man kneeling before him, sizing him up like a man about to sink a jagged knife into a bloody steak.

“You have news, I presume?”

“Of many types,” the kneeling man breathed, and his voice was raspy, consumed from years of hard living and terrible magic. “I have news from many fronts. The newest from the gang wars, from our spies in the League, and... some other news.”

“The gang wars first. How are our forces faring, Evan, my *friend*?”

“Well, very well,” the man named Evan replied, getting to his feet. “IT is crumbling under our concerted attacks, but MKT remains stalwart. As long as Shacklebolt continues smuggling advanced weaponry to them, we will not be able to strike a sizable blow.”

“What about the assassins? Why haven’t they yet made a move on the contract I’ve set against that gunrunner?” the man on the throne growled.

“I cannot be sure, but I fear Shacklebolt may have contacts within the Guild itself,” Evan answered, his heavy brow furrowing. “We may have to rely on outside sources...”

“Until you get conclusive proof of *that*, we’ll utilize them.”

Evan ground his teeth together. "There's more. The Renegade Phoenixes are again active – they've made another strike. According to Muggle news, they blew up a pub in central London last night."

The man on the throne leaned forward, clearly interested. "Did the Phoenixes do it, or was it the Ash-Born?"

"Muggle sources implicate Ash-Born – they are the only ones who would dare cause so much collateral damage." Evan's eyes narrowed. "But you know we can't rely on their sources –"

"It's a necessary asset we can't ignore," the man on the throne interrupted, his eyes glittering. "No matter how repugnant the source is, it is reliable. So the question moves naturally to why. Why did the Ash-Born attack the pub? What was there that could potentially be valuable?"

Evan nervously scratched his temple. "Shammer was there, but he got away with minor injuries. He contacted me with the information that we might have interested criminal parties inquiring into the scene here, but before I could ask for more, he was forced to break the connection."

"Was he compromised? Is that fool even still *alive*?"

Evan shook his head. "The connection broke naturally. He's alive, but he's planning on fleeing to the country for a few weeks until things calm down. Having seen the disaster myself, I would agree with his decision to some degree – an Ash-Born attack is not something one can easily recover from. The devastation was quite extensive."

"Like always," the man on the throne muttered with disgust. "The Shiy-Mord are not trying hard enough – they should have brought in the bastard leading the group by now."

"The young man's elusive," Evan admitted, wincing slightly. "He's evaded capture more than once. Although I agree that his capture is essential, do you honestly believe that Shiy-Mord should solely target him? What about the others, the lieutenants?"

The man on the throne's eyes narrowed. "You dare question my leadership?"

"Not at all – but I do know the strengths and limitations of the Shiy-Mord. You have pushed them to the limit in the recent months," Evan stated firmly. "We can't afford to lose any of them – they are too much of an investment to create, especially now that we've lost the vampire." He glared daggers at the man in the throne, who was now examining his fingernails with disinterest. After a few seconds, he looked up, and smiled slowly, showing teeth.

"Assign four Shiy-Mord to the hunt for the Ash-Born leader. It's a significant investment, but still allows some reserve. On that note, what about the League? How did their little escapades in America go?"

Evan smiled, revealing four gold teeth, replacing the canines in his wide mouth. "Badly, just as we planned. The emissaries were humiliated, and it was a disaster of great proportion for the League. The fools are even more divided, and some have spoken of leaving the League entirely."

"After the old man died, they have no central leader," the man on the throne mused, "yet it amuses me greatly to see them vacillate against me. Do we yet have the location of their hideout?" Evan shook his head, and the other sighed with vexation. "No matter – they aren't enough of a threat to bring us down. Any more news about them?"

Evan winced; here came the bad news. "Rumors have it that the *Wil-Esarn* have dispatched Fenrir Greyback to England. You know he's raring for blood, especially after what was done to his family." Evan had *been* there on that attack, and had seen the utter carnage. When he was alone, he could remember the enraged, blood-streaked visage of the werewolf – he knew better than anyone how dangerous Greyback was.

"Greyback is a problem, but he is manageable," the man on the throne noted succinctly. "What about that last problem? International or local?"

“Local,” Evan said. He swallowed hard, fear filling his heart. He didn’t know how to tell his master this, especially considering the magnitude of the news. “I got a tip from one of my Muggle agents. It appears... that there are wizards and witches in England that we don’t have on file.”

The man on the throne rose to his feet so quickly that it was nearly a flash. Evan instinctively fell to his knees and directed his gaze to the intricately carved floor – it was not safe to meet his master’s gaze after delivering potentially disastrous news.

“Are you... certain?” the hooded man growled, his hands clenched into fists. “Who are they? Names, if you have them and descriptions if you don’t!”

Evan gasped for air. “One is a dark-haired teenager. Tall, green eyes, round glasses – he was the one who approached our agent. He had a strange scar across his forehead – almost like a lightning bolt. He was inquiring about the old Ministry entrance...”

The hooded man cursed violently, and Evan reeled back, clutching his bleeding nose. He knew it was hardly the end, but his master hadn’t even drawn his wand yet.

“Are there any more?” the hooded man hissed, and Evan frantically pulled himself back to his knees.

“Yes – yes! There is another, a black-haired girl. She’s older than he is, with ice-blue eyes. The agent told us that she seemed to flicker slightly, almost as if she didn’t exist...”

The hooded man froze. Turning on his heel, he approached the wall. Drawing his wand, he muttered some words under his breath. Almost like the flicker of a fluorescent bulb, a section of the *wall* came into sharp focus, revealing a plethora shifting and moving images, whirling with gleaming colour. Evan hazarded a glance up, and saw his master. With quick, deft twists of his wand, the hooded figure flipped through cycles of arcane symbols and sifted through images as if he was separating tree branches, all the while muttering under his breath the incantation needed to power the scrying spell.

“Master...”

“We need to trace their locations,” the hooded man whispered, as a large aerial picture of London came onto the screen. “The odds are significant that they have not yet left London, and that means we can track them via magical aural perception. Coupled with my own advanced scrying, we should soon have their location.”

“Should we bring any of the Parliament on board with M.A.P.?” Evan asked hesitantly, using the colloquial abbreviation for magical aural perception. It was one of his master’s most ingenious inventions, allowing him to track users of magic by their aural type. Yet Evan dreaded the potential fallout of his words – the Parliament was a necessary evil in his master’s organization, one that neither of them particularly liked or tolerated well.

“Unfortunately,” the hooded man replied, grinding his teeth, “we may have no choice, especially if we wish to round up these suspicious witches and wizards. I want you to contact the Parliament and deal with *them* – I will work the scrying magic from this location. Once a definite location is established, send the shock troops in to root them out. No permanent incapacitation or damage – I want them alive and before me before dusk tomorrow.” The harshness in his voice made it very apparent to Evan that his master’s personal desire was more than just an idle wish – it was an order he expected carried out, with no room for failure. Evan swallowed hard, and then composed himself.

“I’ll contact the Controller immediately.”

“Do not fail me, Evan Rosier,” the hooded man said, an ominous note in his voice as he turned away from the glowing images on the walls. “You know, more than anyone, my tolerance for failure.”

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For a few seconds, Harry could barely breathe, and Nicci could see him sway slightly on his feet. The person who stood a few meters away from them defied everything that they knew and expected. They *knew* that Remus Lupin was dead – hell, she had been *at* the funeral

– but this man, scarred and disheveled with hateful expressions, was very clearly the man she had known.

In a second, Harry's mind jumped to the most logical conclusion, and he raised his wand at the man. "Declare and identify yourself!"

The man standing in front of him cocked his eyebrows and let out a low chuckle. "Who the *hell* do you think you are, boy?"

"You know who I am," Harry replied evenly, his eyes blazing with suspicion. "Everyone in our world knows my name."

Nicci swore under her breath at Harry's arrogance – there were many wizards who were distinctive, not just Harry Potter, and from the looks of things, Lupin had automatically jumped to the worst possible conclusion.

"Clearly *you* are the one masquerading, boy, if you expect that I know you," Lupin growled, taking a single step closer. Nicci and Malfoy raised their wands warningly – Ginny was slower off the mark, but her own eyes flashed with suspicion as she leveled her wand at her former professor.

Harry's expression was incredulous. "Remus John Lupin, how can you not know me? You taught me in third year to produce a corporeal Patronus... you, you were one of the best members of the Order of the Phoenix that I ever knew... hell, you asked me to be the godfather of your *son*! Where's Teddy Lupin? Where's Tonks? Is she alive too?"

Lupin's eyes narrowed. "What are you *talking* about? I have never been a professor and I don't have a son! Hell, I'm not even married! Are you delusional, boy? Who the hell *are* you?"

Nicci rolled her eyes. "Oh, come *on*, Lupin. Don't you know who he is? Quit with this charade – it's embarrassing to your reputation."

Lupin shifted his aim to Nicci, and her Uzi was out in a flash. "*You*," he growled, "I have no hesitation killing, especially after what happened in the club last night. You could have killed dozens of

people with your little explosive. Frankly, I don't care about killing a *Shiy-Mord* like you!"

"I don't even know what the hell you're talking about, and, if anything, *you* are the one who has been stalking us!" Nicci hissed. "Doing a bad job, nonetheless, but I've seen you." She cocked her Uzi with a flick of her thumb. "And I don't take well to stalkers, especially ones who are *supposed* to be dead."

"And yet I stand, alive and well," Lupin snapped back, his eyes blazing with anger. "A pity your little dream can't be realized, Shiy-Mord. You two," he gestured to Ginny with his wand, "are dying first."

"What has Ginny done?" Harry asked furiously. "Lupin, are you insane? It's *me*, Remus! Harry Potter! You know me!"

Lupin froze, and it seemed that his wand-arm began to shake. "What did you say your name was?" he asked quietly, a tremor in his voice.

"Harry James Potter," Harry said slowly, as if he was speaking to a slow student, trying to keep the impatience out of his voice. "Son of James Potter and Lily Evans."

Lupin moved suddenly, and before Nicci could even depress the trigger of her Uzi, Lupin had pinned Harry to the charred stone wall by the throat, his wand an inch from Harry's scar.

"You – are – a – liar," Lupin growled, looking into Harry's startlingly green eyes. "Lily never had a child with Potter. She couldn't conceive with him - not like she wanted to, but that's besides the point. There is no 'Harry Potter'!"

Nicci leveled her Uzi at the back of Lupin's head, and Ginny's wand quickly followed. "Can you deny the evidence of your own eyes, Lupin? Can you deny that this man is James' son?"

Lupin shoved Harry to the ground, and he fell heavily to the stone floor, shaking badly. "It's a clever disguise, but I've seen better. I wouldn't put it past the Others to try something like this."

Nicci recognized the gang name, but she thought better of it. "You're outnumbered, Lupin. Are you ready to die?"

"Don't kill him, Nicci," an unexpected voice pleaded, weak but fervent. Nicci turned to Harry with incredulous eyes.

"He's told us he wants to kill us!" Nicci said furiously, pointing her wand at Harry while keeping her wand leveled at Lupin. "Harry Potter, are you *insane*?"

"Yes," Lupin and Malfoy answered simultaneously. Ginny gave the blond an acidic look, and he only shrugged. "What? He *is* crazy."

"He's not right in the head, Nicci, we have to help him!" Harry pleaded, with desperation in his eyes. Nicci hesitated for a second...

But that second was all Lupin needed. Moving blindingly fast, he slapped the raised Uzi away with the flat of his hand. Nicci twisted her wand back towards the werewolf, but his fist was already lodged deep in her gut. She doubled over, but Lupin followed his punch with a right hook to her jaw, which she barely managed to turn with. A second later, she was on the ground, bleeding from her mouth.

She heard Ginny scream a curse, but the flash of light streaked over the werewolf's head. Even Malfoy was aiming to attack, but Lupin jumped at Ginny instead, his own wand drawn...

Picking up her wand and Uzi awkwardly, she rolled towards the wall and screamed "*REDUCTO!*" The badly aimed curse came nowhere near Lupin, but the werewolf still dodged.

And then Harry was on his feet, his own wand out, but Malfoy's curse was faster, hitting Lupin square in the back of the head. The werewolf howled in pain, but seemed to shrug the curse off like water.

Nicci knew she had seconds left before something went terribly wrong. Leveling her Uzi, she let loose a spray of bullets at Lupin. Most missed, but two lodged in his forearm, inches away from his face. The werewolf screamed in pain, but Nicci was already moving, ramming her shoulder into Lupin's solar plexus. A second later, he

was down on the charred stone floor, Nicci's knees on his chest, her wand inches from his eyes.

"You see, werewolf, I don't give a rat's ass *who* the hell you think you are," Nicci snarled, her voice slow and methodical. "What I do care about is how you managed to find us initially, and who you're working for. Here's how the situation works – I ask a question, you give me an answer. One question, one answer. If I don't get the answer I like, we've got a big problem, and if we've got a problem, *you've* got a problem. Is that vividly clear?"

"I don't take orders from Shiy-Mord," Lupin spat, shaking blood from his mouth, "and certainly not from your type –" The werewolf couldn't make out any more words for his own scream, as Nicci, with a quick stomp, lodged the bullets in his arm even deeper. Harry moved to help, but Malfoy was physically holding him back.

"You bring me to my first question quite aptly, then," Nicci said, the chill seeping back into her voice. She had interrogated subjects many a time, and her old dealer agent style came back easy. "What's a Shiy-Mord? Why do you *assume* that Miss Weasley and I are Shiy-Mord?"

"You know perfectly well what a Shiy-Mord is, considering that you associate with one," Lupin hissed again. "Miss *Weasley* over there is a well-known Shiy-Mord, one of the most brutal. She's no Weasley though, that's for damned sure."

"Of course I am!" Ginny exclaimed, raising her eyebrows with confusion. "Youngest daughter of the family! You know that, Professor!"

"The Weasley family – or at least the decent parts of it – died with Arthur and his son Percy," Lupin whispered, and for a second, it seemed like his eyes glazed over with painful memories. "They called it a terrorist attack, but we all know better. They were murdered seven years ago, in the beginning of autumn. It was a terrible loss, and thousands of Muggles and wizards died that day."

Nicci swore under her breath. She had been hearing far too much about 'terrorists' lately and it was beginning to bother her how little

she knew about this mysterious new group of outlaws. *Shammer's got a lot of explaining to do*, she thought, even as she looked down into Lupin's hateful eyes. "Who do you mean, 'we'?" she asked carefully, changing the topic. Ginny's face was already white with horror, and Nicci could see her shaking.

"The League, obviously," Lupin replied, a bit of confusion entering his expression. "Of course you know about the League and everything that we've *done*? We've given your master quite a headache."

There was a second of silence, and a scuffle of feet. Malfoy swore violently as Harry finally managed to shove his way past and get to Ginny. Tears were falling fast down her face, and Harry could only hold her as she quivered, her eyes glazed with tears... and blazing with rage. Nicci, despite herself, felt a bit of pity for Ginny. *She wanted my lifestyle, but she wasn't prepared for this... and everything that goes with it...*

Lupin was not looking at Nicci anymore, but at Ginny, with utter confusion. "What's going on? Is this some clever trick? I thought... I thought..." His voice trailed off as Harry held a sobbing Ginny in his arms, tears running down his own face. Nicci noted the expression on Lupin's face, which was as if he couldn't quite comprehend what was happening... that everything that he had seen here was flying in the face of everything that he had known...

Malfoy, of all people, looked the most out-of-place. His gaze passed from Harry and Ginny, in each others' arms, to Nicci, pinning Lupin to the ground. His own hands were shaking, but Nicci doubted it was from grief. *He's probably just as confused and traumatized as the rest of us, but he has the emotional control not to show it. Something that both he and I got from our father.*

Lupin seemed to shiver for a second, and Nicci turned back to him and moved her wand closer, but Lupin seemed not to notice. His eyes closed, and then reopened quickly, and he shook his head slightly, as if to clear it from some sort of fog.

"I don't understand..." he whispered to himself. "I really don't understand... something is wrong here..."

“What’s wrong?” Nicci asked sharply, knowing now that her opportunity to press for information was on. “*What’s wrong?*”

Lupin gestured weakly at Ginny, a look of horror entering his eyes, as if he had committed a terrible mistake. “A Shiy-Mord cannot shed tears unless her lord... unless her lord...” His voice broke off, and he began to shake. Nicci tightened her grip, but Lupin was not going anywhere. He was shaking with anguish.

“You aren’t being clear,” Nicci growled, “and I don’t like it. What the *hell* are you talking about? Has your little insanity act cleared up?”

“I’m not insane,” Lupin replied quietly, his voice barely even quaking, “although I question my stability everyday, and if you had seen what I have seen, you would too. You can’t understand –”

Nicci *did* understand, but she wasn’t going to let the werewolf know about it – there were too many variables she didn’t understand or have control over. She couldn’t trust Lupin, even despite any *former* relationship he had with Harry. *I can’t take the chance*, she thought to herself. *Not now. Not in this time period. Not at least until we know more.*

“Nicci,” Malfoy replied tersely. “Let him up – you won’t get answers from him this way. We don’t have time for torture, and you know that. I’ve got my wand fixed on the werewolf, and the second he moves, I’ll send a silver bullet right through his face.”

“You wouldn’t *dare* –”

“Watch me, Potter,” Malfoy shot back. “And *you*, if anybody, should be on my side with this.”

“Remus is my friend –” Harry began furiously.

“Remus here doesn’t even know who you *are*, Potter,” Malfoy snarled. “I’m assuming the worst possible scenarios here: either the werewolf was *badly* Confunded and lost his mind, or...” Malfoy’s voice trailed off as a startlingly new possibility jumped into his head.

“I’m not insane,” Lupin stated curtly, before Nicci could ask Malfoy to finish his statement. “And you, Miss Nicci, are causing me a great deal of pain. I promise not to leave here – not until I know what the hell is going on. I likely have as many questions as you do.”

Nicci swore at Malfoy’s mention of her name. *Foolish idiot, he’s given away too much.* “I prefer,” she replied slowly, “to negotiate from a position of strength.”

“Of course you do, but sometimes that is not always possible. And of course I am not inclined to trust you. But,” Lupin added evenly, looking into Nicci’s icy eyes, “I *am* willing to exchange information.”

“That’s a startling change from a few minutes ago,” Malfoy sneered. “What makes you think we’re going to be *that* accommodating?”

“Because you look as lost and confused as I once was,” Lupin shot back, a dangerous expression on his face. “And this will also be the quickest way to get solid information.”

“Fine,” Nicci snapped, “but the questions go by *my* terms. Harry, quit consoling Ginny and get over here – you need to hear this. We all do.”

Harry looked up at Nicci with startled surprise, which immediately burned away to anger. “How *dare* you? Can’t you see Ginny’s in pain?”

“I warned her,” Nicci replied dangerously, her eyes glinting. “It was going to happen some time or other.”

“HER FATHER IS DEAD!” Harry roared. “Are you so inhuman that you can’t give her a second to grieve?”

Nicci froze, her eyes blazing with rage. She slowly got up off of Lupin and leveled her wand at Harry. She kept her Uzi angled at the werewolf – she never knew what could happen.

“Listen to me, you conceited jackass,” Nicci spat, her icy eyes meeting Harry’s. “I don’t know where you acquired your superiority

complex, but it is starting to give me a headache, and now it's jeopardizing our *lives*. We are in a hostile world –"

"More than you can ever imagine..." Lupin muttered.

"–And we need to focus on our chief priorities. Remember, Potter, this is not the same time as we came from. Arthur Weasley could very well be alive in our era!"

"Then this is what's going to happen!" Harry snapped, letting go of Ginny and turning, furious, to the cold-eyed woman facing him. "This is the hell we're going to have to face! After everything that I did, it's going to come to *this*! And as far as we know, Ginny doesn't have any other family in this period! Let me ask you this, Nicci: why *shouldn't* she be upset?"

"Because it's unnecessary and a waste of her own energy," Nicci replied coolly.

"You self-righteous arrogant bitch," Harry hissed. "You filthy hypocrite. Didn't you spend seven years of your life wallowing in your own misery because *your* parents were killed?"

Harry didn't manage to get any more words off, because Nicci was already moving. A second later, Harry was on the ground, his nose bleeding freely. Nicci's Uzi and wand were now leveled at Harry, his blood trickling off the muzzle of the submachine gun. In that second, the shadows that seemed to surround her when she was a dealer agent returned in full force.

"When you feel up to understanding the *hell* I went through," Nicci growled, placing emphasis on every word, "I'll be sure to talk to you. Until then, if you don't want a round of Uzi bullets in your *face*, you will not talk about what I told you. I didn't say everything, you know – I gave you the cursory details that were relevant to the luhix issues. Trust me, Potter, you don't want to know the real details."

"Luhix?" Lupin asked, interested. "How do *you* know about it?"

"It's not important," Nicci snapped. "Suffice to say, Potter, it's not safe for you to attempt to judge or criticize my behavior – you don't have the *authority*."

"And who does?" Malfoy asked sardonically, trying to hold back a chuckle. Nicci glared at him, and he held up his hands with mock helplessness. "What? Don't look at me like that. This is actually genuinely *funny*. I mean, you pistol-whipped *Harry Potter* in the face!"

"Don't push me, or you're next."

Ginny glared at Nicci as she helped Harry to his feet. Nicci just smiled sweetly back at her as she turned back to Lupin.

"All right, werewolf, start talking. It'll be an exchange of information – you go first."

Lupin's jaw clenched. "Fine."

"And no lies either."

"*I get it*. What do you want to know?"

"What's the date today?"

"Sunday, May 11th, 2008," Lupin said coolly, a look of confusion crossing his face. "You're wasting your question asking *that*?"

"I have my reasons," Nicci replied calmly. Behind her, Malfoy swore while Harry and Ginny exchanged aghast looks. "Your question, werewolf."

Lupin pointed at Harry, who had just staunched the nosebleed with Ginny's help. "When was he born? He looks about seventeen, but in this age, you can't be sure."

"And he thinks we're wasting questions," Ginny muttered, wiping a tear from her face. Despite herself, Nicci grinned. *She's getting over the deaths better than I expected.*

Harry crossed his arms over his chest. "I was born July 31st, 1980."

Lupin raised his eyebrows. "Are you *quite* sure of that, boy? You know more than anybody that's impossible."

Harry rolled his eyes. "How can that be impossible? It's just a day."

"Then why do you only look like you're in your late teens?" Lupin asked, springing his trap, his eyes glittering. "That was twenty-eight years ago, boy. So I'll ask again – when were you born?"

"July 31st, 1980," Harry replied sharply. "I'm not lying."

Lupin clenched his fists. "We can't verify that here, unfortunately, although it might interest you to know that your *birthday* was right in the middle of the Torrent – I know very well it was impossible."

Nicci noted the word 'Torrent', but she put it aside for now. *That's not the most important thing right now.* "My question now: who is currently leading MKT?"

"Why is that even *relevant*?" Malfoy spat. "Isn't it more important to find out where the hell we are, or what the hell happened *here*?" He gestured around the charred kitchen, his eyes scanning the melted and blackened stones.

"Focus on the present, not the past, brother," Nicci shot back. "This is important. Well, Lupin?"

He paused for a second, and seemed to be deliberating. Finally, after a few seconds, he shook his head. "I can't tell you."

Nicci raised her wand. "And why would that be?"

"Because it compromises the integrity of my operations," Lupin replied coldly. "For I know, you could be a spy for the Others or IT and have me killed."

"Do you have dealings with them?"

"That's not your business either," Lupin said with a smirk. "My question. When did you land on the island?"

“*What?*”

“You heard me, *Miss Weasley*,” Lupin uttered the name with utter contempt, as if he thought that the name belonged to another. “You have fair accents, but you could have easily come from the States or the mainland. When did you arrive here?”

Nicci exchanged a gaze with her brother, who shrugged. There wasn’t any serious problem with giving away when they turned up in the future. “Yesterday, about midday,” she answered simply. “My question now: why were you stalking us?”

“For all intents and purposes, you resembled my enemies, the girl the most,” Lupin replied with a scowl. “She looked exactly like a Shiy-Mord, and I couldn’t risk her getting away to...” His voice trailed off, filled with remembered pain.

“And so you were going to *kill* me?” Ginny asked incredulously. “That’s not like you, Remus Lupin. You *taught* me at Hogwarts –”

Lupin’s eyes narrowed. “Do not mention that academy of *filth* in my presence again, girl. I never had the displeasure of teaching at that school. It went downhill since the *Purgus Render*.”

“What the hell is that?” Malfoy asked. “Sounds like some sort of massacre.”

“It *was*,” Lupin growled. “We lost a lot of good people that day. Frankly, I’m not surprised you hadn’t heard about it. Devil’s Night, 1994... thousands of people died.” His eyes narrowed in suspicion. “You have a lack of knowledge regarding history that makes no sense, considering your ages. You *lived* through it. Surely you know *something?*”

Nicci flushed. “When you begin being specific, we might be able to figure out what the hell you’re talking about. What *something?* What happened the last ten years? What did we miss? Just assume we’re ignorant of everything.”

Lupin’s eyes went wide. “You don’t *know?* You don’t know about the *Purgi*, the Sky-Burnings, the Lost War, the terrorist attacks,

anything?” He shook his head, anger in his eyes again. “How do I know you’re not just stalling to bring in the Others?”

Harry and Ginny flushed too. “Primarily, because, ah... we have no idea what you’re talking about, or even what these ‘Others’ even are.” Harry finished his sentence in a hurry, before turning away. Malfoy rolled his eyes. Nicci swore under her breath – she hadn’t had the chance to fully explain to the group about what Shammer told her about the gang situation, and it was already costing them.

Lupin let an amused expression slip onto his face, almost sneering at their ignorance, but not quite. “Are you *kidding* me, boy? You honestly don’t *know*?”

“That’s what he just said,” Malfoy volunteered with a smirk. “He doesn’t know a lot of things.”

“It’s not like you’re any better – you don’t know either!” Ginny snarled, flipping her hair back. The tears were gone now, and despite herself, Nicci was impressed how well Ginny composed herself.

Malfoy, for his part, just shrugged. “And? I’m amused by this whole issue. The mystery is... intriguing, to say the least.”

“What mystery?” Lupin asked sharply. “There shouldn’t be any *mystery* at all with this!”

Malfoy turned to Nicci. “Well, beloved *sister*? Should we tell the werewolf about our little escapade?”

“Are you willing to risk the danger? Can you trust him? Do you forget so easily that he nearly *killed* us?” Nicci snarled testily back, her patience thinning.

“He didn’t know who we were,” Harry said quietly, almost to himself, “and despite my own pretense towards holding the truth back, I feel if we are going to be working with –”

“*Working with?*”

“Fine, *cooperating with* him, then,” Harry snapped. “We can tell him the truth, and then *he* tells us everything that we need. Can you do that, Remus?”

Nicci could almost envision the gears meshing in Lupin’s head, his own desire for information warring with his distrust of the group. Nicci remained tense – she expected that an exchange with that sort of detail would not happen here. *We’ll probably have to go to a secure location, and we’ll meet there. No benefits either way... unless I can get there first... and he won’t think that I know this city well enough to get to the location and control the location...*

Finally, Lupin nodded stiffly. “We’ll meet tonight at midnight – behind Southwark Cathedral, by the burned-out truck. Be there by midnight, otherwise I won’t say anything.”

Harry looked as if he was going to protest, but Nicci cut him off. “Deal,” she replied. “We’ll be there.” Both Malfoy and Ginny looked surprised at the choice, but Nicci ignored them. “The same conditions go for you, too.”

Lupin nodded, and turning on his heel, he Disapparated with a crack. Nicci waited a solid ten seconds before she turned to Harry, who was fingering the shards of the shattered locket.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that, Ginny,” Nicci said quietly, “but I don’t trust that Lupin character. Apparently a *lot* has happened in ten years.” She sighed. “But we need to keep going.”

“Still didn’t give you a right to pistol-whip me in the face,” Harry muttered, giving her a baleful gaze.

“What, are you going to attack me?” Nicci asked sharply, her eyebrows rising. “Potter, when you want to know the full truth about what I did, I’ll tell you in the right time and place – and in front of a man that we don’t know if we can trust, such *sensitive* information shouldn’t be mentioned. Currently right *now*, I can’t trust that you wouldn’t use that information in a way that could jeopardize our mission.”

“Which is?” Malfoy asked, leaning against the filthy wall. “We don’t really have a purpose here – and nobody can tell what the hell you’re planning, Nicci.”

Despite her own instincts – and the fact that even she didn’t know what she was planning entirely, Nicci swallowed hard and struggled to contain her rising anger. “We need to get back to our time period. Somehow, that’s connected to Rookwood – our goals *should* be to find that bastard and get the information about how to get back home. If we find other information about this time period, then we do – that’s *not* our first priority. Remember, *we shouldn’t be here*. Lupin obviously mistook Ginny for somebody he hates in his time period, and we should be prepared if this happens again. The disguise was good, but it was too late – he saw you before you dyed your hair.”

Ginny looked pale, but composed – which Nicci thought was a miracle in itself. “From the expression on Lupin’s face when he mentioned the Shiy-Mord – whatever *that* is – she must be a real horror. It was almost as if he thought *I* was the Shiy-Mord...”

An unwelcome thought slid into Nicci’s mind – that Ginny might indeed *be* this Shiy-Mord in this time period – but she didn’t vocalize it. *The last thing we need is any more traumas for her – from everything I’ve heard, her psyche is unstable as it is. The last thing we need is that possibility.*

“So do you know where Southwark Cathedral is?” Malfoy asked, running his hand through his hair.

Nicci nodded once. “It’s near the center of London. I even know where the truck is, if it’s the same one that I remember.” She declined to mention that the truck was ruined because her brother had torched it in a fight with the German luhix supplier Raskoch nearly eleven years earlier. She wondered how Lupin knew about it. *Maybe Tonks mentioned something to Lupin before she died...*

A sudden thought jumped to her mind, one that stunned her to the core. *If Lupin’s alive, it could be a possibility that Tonks is alive too! If I find her, I can tell her everything and fix it all!*

“Why are you smiling?” Malfoy asked suspiciously.

“Nothing, nothing,” Nicci replied absently, as she holstered her Uzi. “Just contemplating possibilities.”

--

As soon as Lupin entered the tiny alley, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed the private number, his thoughts blazing with his own possibilities.

A tired voice answered the phone. “Yes, Remus?”

“Cliff, we’ve got new variables in the equation. I think we have unauthorized visitors in the city.”

Cliff’s voice was immediately alert with shock. “What? Are you sure? Give me details. Names first.”

“One was named Harry Potter –”

“Hold on, time out! Is he of any relation to *James Potter*?” The shock in Cliff’s voice was evident.

“According to him, he’s James’ son by Lily,” Lupin said tiredly. “We both know that’s impossible, but Cliff, you should see him. He looks so much like James...”

“Who else?”

“The other boy, I didn’t catch the name of, but I heard both the girls’ names. One is reportedly named Ginny Weasley.”

Cliff’s voice was edged. “She’s a Shiy-Mord, Remus. We both know that. She can’t be an *unauthorized visitor*!”

“She might look like the Shiy-Mord, but once again, I think she might be an imposter,” Lupin replied, scratching his unshaven jaw. “She looked very close to the one we know, though...”

“Who’s the last one?”

“That’s who I want *you* to check out,” Lupin answered curtly. “Her name – or at least the one that I caught – was Nicci. That’s not a

typical pureblood name, last time I checked. I didn't get a last name, unfortunately. She's vicious, though – and she doesn't have a problem combining Muggle technology with magic.”

“So? We do it all the time.”

“We do it because it's the only way we can work under *his* M.A.P. – he hasn't found a way yet to trace our radio signals,” Lupin replied with a sigh. It would be a *very* bad day when he found out how to do that. “This Nicci combines sorcery and tech as easily as anyone I've seen. Classify her as the highest threat.”

“Logged. So what did these mysterious visitors want anyway?”

Lupin took a deep breath – he still didn't trust the mysterious group's responses, but he was curious enough to give tell Cliff the essentials. *I've got questions of my own – some that don't exactly have to be on record – and he won't have any problem condoning my meeting.* “They wanted information. I agreed to an exchange – we can probably use them, if we manipulate the situation the right way – behind Southwark Cathedral at midnight. I need backup there – chances are they don't know where the Cathedral is, and we can hold the advantage.”

“What kind of advantage do we need?” Cliff asked warily. “Depending on what you want, we might need League clearance.”

“Forget the League right now, this is more important,” Lupin replied hastily, his mind blazing with possibilities. “I want security glyphs and a zone of truth dropped over the area.”

“Remus, you *know* we'd need executive clearance to activate one of the *zones* –”

“Cliff, I told you, *forget* about the League. By the time we get executive clearance, others will know about the situation, and we'll have people operating *interference*.” Lupin ground his teeth as he spoke that word – he knew well enough the people who would be interested in the new arrivals, and not all for the best reasons. “I'm going in alone on this.”

“We should still notify a few members of the League – your allies, I mean,” Cliff quickly added. Lupin swore softly to himself, but he knew Cliff wasn’t going to back down on this – he cared too much for Lupin’s welfare.

“You handle it. Make sure my rivals don’t get wind of this, and *don’t* use the grapevine to pass the information. Do it in person. We have to avoid any sort of leak – the last thing I need is our failed ambassador meddling in this.”

Cliff paused for a few second, before giving a heavy sigh. “Dear Merlin, Remus, I hope that you know what you’re doing.”

“So do I,” Lupin replied grimly as the line went dead. “By Merlin, so do I.”

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“I think we have a problem.”

“So what else is new, Croaker? You always have a problem.”

“Not that one, another one! The returned souls aren’t settling the way they should. And you know that better than anyone – didn’t you see how our little Marauder behaved? He should have –”

“This sort of thing requires some adjustment. Unlike most, his soul won’t settle as easily – so much is different for him. He was one of the major players, don’t forget that.”

“And what about the first, then? He settled quickly and quietly. And what about all the unauthorized ones that have been slipping back in? Most of them are settling quite well, Garren. What’s the discrepancy?”

“The first one is getting an improvement, as are most of the unauthorized ones, compared to their previous lives. The Marauder went back because he had no choice, so it’s not surprising that he’s taking a long time to adjust.”

“Not surprising perhaps to you, but unlike you, I’m not gifted with omniscience.”

“You should work on that, then.”

“All right, then, Mr. Omniscient Garren, what about our other reluctant travelers? They are still in the dark! Was that part of your plan?”

“They haven’t adjusted as well as I was hoping for.”

“Of course they haven’t, considering two of them don’t exist in that frame, and the other two are so diametrically different than their other selves that they won’t ever adjust. But you knew that, of course.”

“Don’t push me, Croaker. I know my limits.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

“We have no choice – we must interfere in some manner.”

“It’s not ‘we’, Garren. It’s ‘you’. You’re the one who can send the souls back – providing that is indeed what you are planning.”

“No souls this time. Why bother? It wouldn’t seriously effect the frame. No, we need to give them a clue of some sort. Perhaps we can introduce some sort of ‘extraneous effect’ into the frame to give them a bit of a move.”

“You’re either talking about artifacts or effects. Are you prepared to mess with the River that much?”

“As I said, Croaker, we have no choice. I’ll give all four a little boost, equalize the bar a little bit.”

There was a long, slow whistle. “Are you sure you want to do that? Can they handle it?”

“One of them can, but the others... Well, only time will tell.”

“And you’re the one who says that we shouldn’t rely on time.”

“Until we can directly interfere with the River – and I know your opinion on that – we won’t be able to do much. This is the only way.”

“The only way that you’ve considered.”

“The only way there is, Croaker. We can’t afford to lose now. I can see the oblivion coming.”

“And how near is it, now?”

“Close, Croaker. Closer than you’d ever want to see.”

Chapter 8

“Beloved sister, remind me again what you want us to do now, because as of this moment, it’s not making *any* sense at all.”

“We just went over it, Malfoy!” Ginny groaned with exasperation, her hands clenched into fists. “What more do you want?”

Draco Malfoy leaned back in the uncomfortably cheap chair that he was sitting in and looked lazily around the restaurant. Brightly lit with white lights and filled with red and yellow plastic, it seemed the Muggle version of a Gryffindor kitchen. And, as he had expected, the food was cheap, greasy, and terrible.

His sister glared at him, but Draco ignored it, turning his attention to the Potter boy, who was devouring his food with singular attention. “And you, Potter? Did you understand any of my sister’s plans?”

“She just wants us to have a line of communication,” Potter replied, taking a deep slurp from his straw of whatever watered-down Muggle soft drink he was consuming. “I don’t see anything wrong with that –”

“We have *spells* for that sort of thing,” Draco drawled, rubbing his back from where the blasted chair was digging in. *You’d think that this Merlin-forsaken place could invest in a cushion*, he thought acidly. “There are communications spells that we can learn that can relieve us from this requirement to use a Muggle tellsone –”

“Cell phone,” Nicci growled, tearing the receipt off the paper bag and shoving it into her jacket with a disgusted snort.

“Whatever. The *point* is, all we need to do is go to Diagon Alley and –”

“Haven’t you been listening?” Ginny snarled, her red-black hair tousled as she shoved the remains of her food into the paper box in which it had been served. Draco smirked – he actually *liked* Ginny’s new bad-girl look, even if she hadn’t yet developed the savvy to pull it off properly. *And somehow I’m already thinking of her by her first name. Tsk tsk, Draco, you should know better than that.*

“After what Lupin said, we can’t afford to go into Diagon Alley until we know more! Do you want to end up dead?” Harry asked, his voice even.

“I’m confident I can take care of myself,” Draco remarked, tossing his hair back. He still hadn’t gotten used to the coloring, but he did find that it accented the colour of his eyes *very* well. A few Muggle girls had noticed and were staring. “And my sister has already made it bluntly clear that she can too. The only people who I don’t think can take care of themselves are you two.” With a sudden twist, he pulled the lid off of his drink and took a long pull of the soft drink. The hard bubbles fizzed in his throat as he swallowed the sweet substance. *For some American drink named with a name like ‘Coca-Cola’, it’s not actually that bad.* He set his cup down with a hollow click. “A clear discrepancy in your Gryffindor education.”

Potter flushed. “How is that even relevant? I work just fine in Muggle London, Malfoy – certainly better than you do.”

“I’d dispute that, but it’s an insult to my dignity to be arguing with you right now,” Draco replied with a small grin. He turned to his sister. “As it is an insult to my intelligence not to follow good advice and simply return to Diagon Alley or the Manor.”

“Look, presuming we can assume that the werewolf’s telling the truth —”

“Big presumption,” Malfoy added with a sneer. Both Potter and Ginny glared at him, while Nicci continued as if she hadn’t been interrupted.

“We know that something seriously bad has happened in the past ten years. He mentioned open *massacres*. Not even the Dark Lord killed people that freely. For all we know, and especially with all the gang talk, criminals could be controlling Diagon Alley.” Nicci crossed her arms over her chest. “And given the lack of a visible Ministry entrance, that’s a possibility we can’t rule out.”

“Gang talk?” Potter asked suspiciously. “What are you talking about, Nicci? Did you find out anything in that club?”

"Of course I did," Nicci replied with a grimace. "According to my contact – who I plan to hurt *very* badly the next time I see him – we have the equivalent of gang warfare in London. Given from what the werewolf said, the likelihood is that there are wizarding contacts in all three gangs involved. My guess is that the werewolf is affiliated with MKT, with IT and the Others as his enemies."

"And our enemies," Potter reasoned. Draco rolled his eyes – hadn't the stupid boy figured out that Lupin couldn't be trusted yet?

"Not necessarily, although it is a possibility," Nicci said, her voice filled with caution, as if she was weighing everything she was saying. "As far as I know, my best contact is affiliated with MKT, but that does not mean we are choosing sides in this whole mess – that's a sure way to get us all killed."

"As is getting involved with criminals," Draco remarked lightly, taking another swig of his drink. Nicci glared darkly at him, but he ignored his sister again. "Yet we're doing that – we've arranged a *meeting* with Lupin behind some cathedral."

"And *that's* why I want us to have cell phones," Nicci growled, pulling on her coat as she got to her feet. "We need a line of communication throughout the city, especially if we're separated. I'm going to go to a dealership and get one. Malfoy, if you think you can get one on your own, then do so. Make sure to meet us back at the hotel by three o'clock – we're going to coordinate our meeting with MKT from there. Potter, Ginny, are you two coming with me?"

"Do they have much of a choice?" Draco asked mockingly, getting up and throwing his discarded food containers in the paper bag. Both Potter and Ginny glared at Malfoy again, but once again, he ignored them. "Is there anything else which I should be planning to get?"

"Did you have enough forethought to buy nicer clothes for tonight?" Nicci asked, disgust in her voice. " 'Cause you'll need them if we want to get into MKT's club."

"You think I'm going to wear Muggle clothes that are *less* than top quality?" Draco exclaimed, scandalized. "If I have to wear them,

they're going to be the best. And of *course* I bought formal wear – it'll work with the best of them."

"Why am I not surprised?" Nicci replied tiredly – clearly she didn't have any more patience for her brother. "Remember what I said, and be there at the hotel at three. If you don't show up, don't expect me to come looking for you. After all, *you* can take care of yourself, brother." With that, she spun on her heel and walked for the doors. After throwing him spiteful looks, Ginny and Potter followed suit, leaving Malfoy standing alone with the garbage.

A janitor strode past, his heavy brow furrowing as he stared dully at the paper bag filled with half-eaten food and refuse. "You gonna deal with that?"

Draco glared balefully at him. Here was an uneducated man telling him – a *Malfoy* – to take out the trash. He briefly considered hexing him to kingdom come, but he saw a man behind the white counter at the front of the store glaring at him.

Last thing I need is trouble with their sort, he thought with frustration. Gritting his teeth, he picked up the bag and – cringing all the way at the smell – shoved it into a garbage bag.

"See? Wasn't that hard?" the janitor mumbled as he wiped off the table.

Draco privately consigned him to the deepest, coldest hell that he could think of.

--

Within an hour of shopping around, Draco discovered one thing – shopping for a cell phone was *not* as easy as shopping for good quality clothes.

That settles it. If I ever become Headmaster of Hogwarts, he thought furiously as he walked out of another electronics store, his face red, *I'm making Muggle Studies a mandatory course. No questions asked. And it'll be useful too. Just to avoid this sort of humiliation.*

He rubbed his jaw as he scanned the line of shops. Most he had visited idly, looking for a cell phone. And in most, he had been turned out with incredulous stares and even – even – outright laughter.

He was furious with the store clerks, furious with Nicci and the others for deserting him, and despite everything, furious with himself. *How could I be so stupid to even think I know something about this? I should have just gone along with the others. Thank Merlin Father won't see this – this is humiliating.*

He approached another store, but suddenly a thought struck his mind. *Why am I bothering to shop for a cell phone – I should approach this the way the house always dictated: with ingenuity. Forget purchasing one of these things – everyone has cell phones these days, and most won't ever notice if theirs went missing...*

His eyes scanned the roiling crowds strolling through the narrow street. A few people even had cell phones pressed to their ears, blatantly unaware that a young wizard was marking them.

Draco began walking through the crowd, sliding his wand down his sleeve into his hands. It would be easy – a quick, silent Disarming Charm, followed by a Memory Charm. Simple, clean, and easy.

But Nicci had warned him about using too much magic – Lupin had been able to track them, somehow. Could it have potentially have been by the Memory Charms had had been using on the shopkeepers to shunt away attention?

Nicci doesn't matter here, he thought sharply, and who cares what the bitch thinks anyway? I won't be humiliated like this – and I'll probably be able to get something better than simply buying it...

He passed a small diner with an outdoor patio. As he slowed to take a whiff of the rich scents – so much better than the cheap stench of the restaurant earlier – his eyes fell on an empty table.

Sitting by the salt shaker was a cell phone, plugged into a hidden power outlet at the base of the table. A set of coiled earphones were lying on the table only a few inches away. The phone looked brand-

new – certainly very clean and well-cared for, almost as if it was waiting for him...

Draco didn't hesitate. With a single swift gaze to check for any watching people, he swiped the cell phone with a single motion, snagging the earphones and power cord with a swift tug. Winding the power cord with a few quick twists, he shoved it into his pocket with the earphones and flicked on the cell phone with interest.

Unlike many of the cell phones he had seen, it was made in a single piece, with no movable plates. Painted matte black, it fit easily in his hand with a single screen and rows of buttons beneath it. Frowning, Draco flicked the big silver button right below the screen downward, to display a list labeled *Contacts*.

That's odd, he thought. *There's no names listed here – why hasn't the owner put any names here? It seems that it would be that much faster...*

He pressed a red button, and the main screen appeared, embossed with a hazy blue background. He squinted and pressed a little button to the left of the big silver one. Another list came up on the cell phone – one filled with a list of calls.

Draco was definitely intrigued now. If he guessed right, it appeared that several numbers had called the phone, and that the phone's owner (*prior owner*, he thought to himself) had placed several calls to other numbers, but no names were listed. Only several streams of incomprehensible numbers lined the list. *Just wonderful,* he thought with disgust, getting back to the main screen with the press of a button.

He didn't dare call any of the numbers on the list – that could be disastrous and could alert the former owner. *The only thing I really can do is avoid any calls that are problematic. And any from Nicci that I don't want to hear.*

Nicci's arrival in his life had disturbed things more than even he would acknowledge openly. For years he had thought he was an only child, the heir of the Malfoy name... until Nicci emerged from out of nowhere, claiming that Lucius Malfoy was her father. Worse still, both

of his parents had *confirmed* this information as true, and in *public*. It left Draco in an awkward position – with an older sister who was as rebellious as any young woman, with more dark secrets that anyone had a right to hold, and who was disgusted by Draco's presence.

That girl's got a serious ego problem, Draco thought darkly with disgust as he shouldered his way into a small café. *She acts like she has no rules or guidelines, but everyone has those. Especially Malfoys. If she's going to be taking our money, she better behave like a proper pureblood heiress, and that does not include consulting with career criminals. From what Father told me, she lived years in the underworld, but if she's coming out, she needs to get rid of all of her links to the world down there. And living illegitimately is NOT the way to be successful in either our world or the Muggle world, and the law just hasn't caught up to her yet. I hope I'm there to see it.*

He paid for a small bottle of water and left the café, glaring up at the thickly overcast skies as he did. It was going to start drizzling soon and he picked up his pace, his eyes nervously scanning the streets as he moved.

--

"So?"

"So what?"

"Are you satisfied yet?"

"Since when will I ever be satisfied, Croaker?"

"You disgust me, Garren. Your meddling will cost you."

"It hasn't yet."

"When it will, it will backfire like you'll never believe. Just because you have power here and no responsibility doesn't mean it will always be like this. When they finally find us – and they will find us –"

"Of course they will. That's part of the plan."

"You stand to lose more from that than anyone else, you know. Do you think they'll appreciate our meddling?"

"We're keeping them alive, aren't we?"

"We sent them to hell, and you expect them to be grateful? Garren, you're smarter than this. You know they'll be seething for your blood when they finally find us!"

"Our blood. Not just mine. We're both in this together."

"Not of my volition."

"Croaker, you were the one that showed me the secrets initially! You think I would be here if it wasn't for your experiments in –"

"We can't talk about that openly. You know that."

"Who will hear?"

"She will. And you know that she can hunt us down easily."

"She won't be able to find us if we're careful."

"And you were very nearly careless there. Watch yourself."

"I take offense to being called careless. I'm not careless."

"Of course you are, Garren! You're reckless and careless."

"I'm desperate. As are you. That's how you brought me here. We're acting out of desperation. And you know well enough that sometimes great things come from acts of desperation."

"And sometimes terrible things happen too. You can't deny that."

"This time, we're acting to prevent the terrible things from happening."

"And how has that been going for us, Garren? Has there been success yet?"

A pause, then, "Not yet, but it's getting closer. Oblivion is not the only thing I see anymore."

"What do you see instead?"

"A flickering light, moving towards my hand in the blackness."

"Towards your hand, or your head? Is it a light or an arrow?"

Another pause, then, "I hadn't considered that."

"You never do, Garren. You never do."

--

"You're late," Nicci snapped as Draco opened the door of their hotel suite. From the bathroom, he could hear the shower going full-blast.

"I am not," Draco replied with a dignified air. "You told me to be back here by three o'clock. It is three o'clock."

"Yes, but you forgot that I always expect people at least ten minutes early."

Draco groaned with exasperation as he slumped down into the chair. He flipped his cell phone out and tossed it to his sister, who caught it easily. "Will this do?"

Nicci gave it a cursory examination before handing it back. "It's a Sony Ericsson phone. Not bad, even though it's an older model. You'll get good reception, and it's a sturdy phone. Didn't the manager who sold it to you tell you that it's an older model?"

Not exactly, considering I never talked to a manager, Draco thought, as he wildly searched for an excuse. He quickly opted for the scandalized approach. "Of course he did, but he recommended it just the same, for my purposes. Where's Potter and Ginny?"

"The pretty-boy's picking out better clothes, and Ginny's in the shower. I can only assume you have a decent suit for tonight?"

"Of course I do, and you've already asked that," Draco replied stiffly as he pocketed the cell phone. "What are *you* planning to wear?"

Nicci scowled. "Never you mind, I'll be fine. In any case, we're going to the exclusive club tonight – I placed a good word with an MKT member and he'll get us all in. It's not guaranteeing a meeting with K-Crank –"

"I'm sorry, *K-Crank*?"

"It's Keith Shacklebolt's gangster name," Nicci replied tiredly. "Anyway, we'll get in, but there are no guarantees on the communication."

Draco did a few mental calculations in his head. "And what about the meeting behind that cathedral? Who's going to handle that? We're cutting the timing awfully tight."

"I'll do it," Nicci replied sharply, "while you three are the club. I can trust that you won't make a fool of yourself at a high-class social function?"

"Of course not. Unlike the Weasley girl and Mr. Boy-Who-Lived, I actually know how to behave in public." Draco settled back in his cushions comfortably. It wasn't nearly as good as the chairs at home, but it would have to do. Nicci, turning away from her brother, began tugging at her heeled boots.

After a few seconds of awkward silence, a question came to Draco's mind. "Sister?"

"You say that a lot, Draco, but do you mean it?" Nicci replied unexpectedly, tossing her boots in a corner and flexing her toes.

"You're blood, even if it's... well, even if it's illegitimate," Draco replied, shifting in his seat uncomfortably. "And besides, you're the scion of the Prince house, and you're pureblood. I have to respect that, at least."

"I couldn't care less," Nicci replied, flipping her hair back. "You know money means nothing to me."

"You *know* that's not true," Draco shot back. "Money's a convenience, and you love things that are convenient. And considering the wealth that Professor Snape left you, the money that our father invested, *and* the Prince estate, you have a considerable amount of convenience."

Nicci shrugged. "And? So I have no idea to play the role of the 'idle rich' until some pureblood bachelor comes along? Given my lifestyle, romances don't tend to last long."

"I hadn't noticed," Draco remarked sarcastically. "But don't you *care*? You have money, and you *could* pull off the 'idle rich' role if you wanted. What's preventing you from doing it?"

Nicci leaned back on the bed and eyed her brother frankly, as if she was sizing him up. "Two reasons," she said slowly, measuring every word. "Firstly, part of the whole 'idle rich' role involves associating myself with those who also fit under that category, and given my backdrop as 'illegitimate' – which is the most polite term you could think of – do you really think that the other member of the 'idle rich' will treat me as well as, let's say, *you*?" She spat the words, as if she was disgusted by the taste of them.

Draco winced. He knew exactly what Nicci meant, and he wasn't surprised that it was a sore point for her. She was a bastard daughter of two families, and it was only through a legal loophole in a half-blood's will that she received her money. He knew very well that nearly all of the old families would treat her with disdain at best and hostility at worst. "You have a point, but the Malfoys are in disfavor right now, given the war..."

"The war in which we both were effectively on the same side – that of the Death Eaters." Nicci finished. She crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm in as much disfavor as anyone – hell, I had Aurors ready to arrest me at Hogwarts after the Battle, and they would have if Potter hadn't intervened."

"All right, you have a point," Draco conceded. "That's only one reason, though. What's the other one?"

"Because I'd be utterly and completely *bored*," Nicci replied simply, a small grin spreading across her face. "Maintaining the family manor,

hosting parties, acting *civil*... I'd be bored out of my skull." Draco flushed slightly, colour filling his cheeks. Despite the fact that his own opinion did partially correspond with his sister's – not that he'd ever admit it – the fact that she laid it out in such a sarcastic and explicit tone was almost rude.

"So what do you plan to do?" he asked.

Nicci shrugged. "Crime does have one benefit – it's *never* boring."

Draco's flush deepened as he searched for words. "But it's... it's... you would prefer to be a *criminal*? I thought you swore to Professor Snape that you'd come out it!"

Nicci's smile vanished in a second. "I know that, brother. I was being sarcastic – and making a point. But let's be realistic here – where should I go? The Ministry won't take me with my resume."

"Don't assume that. They might value your undercover skills. After all, you fooled the Death Eaters. And you have plenty of experience with Muggle technology."

Nicci rolled her eyes. "I'm a maverick, Draco. Authority drives me off the wall. If I ever got into the Ministry, I'd be drummed out within a week."

"What about Potter's organization, the Order of the Phoenix?"

Nicci fixed Draco with a steely look. "Guess the answer that question."

"It was just a suggestion."

"A remarkably stupid one."

"That was uncalled for."

"But it was pertinent," Nicci replied coolly. "The 'idle rich' option is obviously out. So where does that leave me?"

The bitterness in Nicci's voice startled Draco – and he didn't startle easily. "What is your problem with living the 'good life'?"

"I should ask you the same question, considering *you* chose to walk out of your parents' manor," Nicci pointed out with a smirk.

"That's a different issue," Draco growled, "and you didn't answer my question."

"I answered your question."

"That doesn't explain the bitterness, though." Draco snapped his mouth shut the second he uttered the words. He silently swore to himself. *I should NOT have said that.*

Nicci looked uncomfortable for a few seconds, and iciness seemed to infuse her eyes. She stood and walked over to the window overlooking London. "Let me ask you something, brother. Do you understand the naming conventions of magic-users?"

Draco felt a twinge of fear. He thought he knew where Nicci was going. "Not... especially," he lied.

"Haven't you noticed that purebloods all receive names that come from esteemed sources, that they have a certain *grandeur* to them?" Nicci seemed to spit the words again, and a scowl spread across her face. "For instance, the Black family names all come from the names of stars. A constellation in the heavens holds your name. When the Dark Lord reinvented his name, he wanted something with significant grandeur, to invoke fear and a sensation of power. Even Severus' name has its roots in Latin."

"I don't see where you're –"

"What significance does the name 'Nicci' have, brother?" Nicci snarled, spinning on her heel to face Draco. "None. *Nothing*. Names mean a lot in magical culture – you know that better than I do. For a pureblood to receive a name like mine would be a slap in the face. It *is* a slap in the face."

"The Weasleys all have normal names," Draco pointed out.

“And you all know that they don’t give a rat’s ass about blood status!” Nicci retorted. “I’m a Slytherin, which just happens to be the house where blood *matters*! My name marks me as an outcast in our society – how well do you think the purebloods will view me, with my newfound riches and my notoriety? You wonder I’m bitter towards pureblood society? *That’s* why.”

“Most of them won’t care,” Draco replied frankly, “as you have money. You’re giving blood culture too much credit.”

“So you think,” Nicci spat. “You didn’t have to go through what I went through in Slytherin when I was at Hogwarts. You were practically *revered*, you told me yourself. It was the opposite for me: I was castigated.” She turned away.

Draco paused, a new thought rising to his mind. “I never told you anything about my years at the school, Nicci,” he said slowly. “How could you have known that...”

Nicci suddenly swore, colour rising to her cheeks. Draco frowned as he thought where on earth he might have told Nicci that sort of information. He had barely seen her, and the only time he could think of talking to her was...

“Sister,” he asked dangerously, “what did I say in the club last night?”

“It’s not important –”

“*What did I say, Nicci?*”

Nicci turned back towards him, a disdainful look on her face. “You told me everything about your little feud with Potter. You said plenty of things about your relationship with your family that you probably don’t want repeated. And you said several things about your personal feelings that you would *never* have said if you were sober.”

Draco’s face was red as he rose to his feet. “And you didn’t *stop* me from saying all of this? What if there were eavesdroppers?”

"There weren't. I was your solitary listener, Draco," Nicci replied, a slow smirk spreading across her face. "You should really be more careful how much you drink."

At that second, Draco privately swore to himself that he would never let himself get into such an uninhibited state again. "So why didn't you tell me to stop, sister? You *knew* that I'd have a problem with that sort of information in the open!"

"Would you relax?" Nicci growled, pulling Draco closer. "Do you really think I'd leak that sort of information? I'm an expert at keeping secrets, Draco, and I know better than anyone the price that leaked information can call down. I nearly ended up worse than dead by your Aunt Bellatrix because I was careless with information. I won't give away your secrets, Draco. And subsequently, you won't give away mine."

"Am I bound by that?" Draco asked sardonically, cocking an eyebrow.

"Only if you don't want me tracking you down and releasing several submachine gun bursts into your skull," Nicci replied, all humour gone from her expression. Draco knew that she was being deadly serious.

Almost on cue, there was a click at the door. Both of them froze and turned towards it. Draco's wand was up in a flash. "Who brings the night?" he called.

"Do the heavens have squires, or must the lords of the unknown call it from the depths?" Harry Potter's tired voice replied, as the young wizard let himself into the room. He carried a suit bag over his shoulder, and an overstuffed bag hung from his other hand. He looked exhausted. "Do we really have to go through that ridiculous routine every time?"

"Do you want to end up dead?" Nicci replied sternly.

"I've been close," Potter replied grimly, "so I would say 'no.'"

"Good, because I don't want to be the one who breaks it to the Weasleys and the Mudblood that you died," Draco replied. From the foul looks that both Nicci and Potter threw him, he immediately

guessed that the use of the word 'Mudblood' was a mistake. *You just can't keep your mouth shut, can you, Draco?*

"Watch your mouth about Hermione," Potter spat as he shoved the door shut. "Just because she's not here doesn't mean you have the right to insult her in front of me."

"It's just a word." Draco shrugged. "One could consider it a part of one's vocabulary..." From the baleful look that Potter was giving him, Draco considered it would probably be conclusive if he kept quiet. *He'll just have to get used to the language. It's not my responsibility to change here.*

"Would it hurt you not to use that word?" Nicci asked tiredly, sitting on the cheap table and flipping open her own cell phone.

"Not really," Draco conceded. *Considering how most of us here hate each other, it would probably be better if I didn't say it again. The last thing I need is all three of them against me – those are long odds, even for a Malfoy.*

"Good, then don't use it," Nicci replied shortly. She turned to Potter. "Well? Did you get the clothes?"

"I got the clothes, but I don't see how they're going to help much," Potter replied. "I'm not used to wearing them, and anyone used to showing up to these events will recognize that."

Of course they will, Potter, but that's not the point. You need to dress the part if you want to learn to play it, Malfoy thought with disgust. *You haven't grown up in the aristocracy, and it doesn't come naturally for you to float in those circles. Nicci knows that, I bet.*

"Is Harry back?" Ginny called through the door.

"Yes," Nicci replied. "Are you ready yet? You can finish up your makeup out here –"

"Yes, Ginny, are you *quite* done?" Draco interrupted, filling his voice with impatient disdain and frustration. "I need to use the bathroom!"

“We didn’t need to know that, Malfoy,” Potter growled.

Nicci only rolled her eyes. “You can’t take your time forever, Ginny. My brother needs to shower.”

“It took you *that* long to figure that out?”

“Shut up, Potter. At least *I* don’t have that intrinsic Gryffindor stink that I need to cover up on a daily basis.”

“Get stuffed, Malfoy.”

“Pretty-boys, shut up,” Nicci replied, trying to keep the disappointment out of her voice. “You’re both adults – act like it.”

Draco shrugged. “He started it.”

The door opened and Ginny slid out. Wearing only a towel, and her red-black hair hanging over her eyes, she sidled towards the second bedroom. Clutching a small bag, she tried to remain out of sight as she darted for the next room, but not before Draco let out a long wolf-whistle. Both Nicci and Harry glared at him.

Draco looked innocent as he held up his hands. “What? I’m only doing what most people will do tonight. Even though she’s a Gryffindor, she’s a looker.”

“How dare you –”

“Draco, Ginny doesn’t need that from you, she’s going through enough right now,” Nicci replied, putting a hand to her eyes. She looked exhausted. “Why don’t you just get in the bathroom and get ready?”

“Are you trying to get rid of me?” Draco asked, his expression and voice filled with mock indignation.

“Yes. Now go.”

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Two hours later, they all stood in the main room, surveying each other's outfits with appraising airs and several concealed smirks.

Nicci turned to her brother, who was openly trying to conceal his laughter. "Well, Draco? What do you think?"

Draco held out his arms, revealing a sleek black suit, complete with silky white shirt and polished shoes. His highlighted hair glistened in the yellow light. "I think I look absolutely stunning, if you ask me –"

"I was asking your opinion about the others, given that you have the most experience in social functions," Nicci growled. "We don't have time for games here, brother. This is your circle, not mine."

Draco pursed his lips as he looked at Potter. He gestured towards the black-haired teenager. "Not bad, with the black suit, although I would say that Potter's garb seems of remarkably lesser quality than my own..."

"Well, forgive me if I do not have your vaunted tastes in clothing," Potter spat. "I got what fitted, and it was for a good price."

"I'm sure it was, if you want cheap fabric that'll wear out after a few seasons," Draco finished triumphantly, turning away from the scarlet-faced teenager. *Take that, Potter.*

"It'll work," Nicci said coolly, "and it doesn't need to be top-of-the-line, Draco. You know that. What about Ginny?"

Draco turned towards Ginny and smiled widely. The youngest Weasley was wearing a fitted black dress with red trim, with gloves and high heels. Her hair was sleek, shiny, and hung in lazy waves across her face and back.

"Ginny," he said slowly, "looks downright sexy, but you're not going to hear me say that." Potter glared at him again, while Nicci sighed. "She's got remarkable poise for her new role, and the hair colour just sets the entire outfit off perfectly. Potter, I'd watch her back, if I was you."

"What is that supposed to mean, Malfoy?"

“He’s got a good point,” Nicci answered for Draco. “It means that Ginny, as a beautiful young woman, is going to be a target. In that dress, she looks older than she actually is, and there’ll be enterprising *bachelors* at this sort of party looking to pick her up.” Nicci emphasized the word *bachelors*, and Draco immediately knew that was the most polite word she could think of to describe the dealers, pimps, and other scum that would likely be at the club.

“As for my sister, I think her approach is decidedly immoderate and not fitting of your station.” Draco’s grin widened. “If you’re *trying* to be noticed on the other hand –”

“Shut up, brother,” Nicci snapped, even as she tugged at the low, lacy neckline of her own outfit. A dark forest green, accented with black and white trim, her dress had a short, flouncy skirt, fitted bodice, and left little to the imagination. Like Ginny, Nicci wore high gloves, but instead of shoes, she wore high-heeled black boots nearly covering her calves. Her own hair was sleek and hung over one eye enticingly. The rest cascaded down her back.

“If my dear mother saw you wearing that, she would have cardiac arrest.”

“Shut up, Draco.”

“If our dear father saw you, he would haul you off to rehabilitation in the Ministry.”

“*Shut up, Draco.*”

“And that’s not even to comment on what other people might say...”

“Enough,” Ginny snapped, cutting Draco off in mid-sentence. “I’m sure Nicci has a very good reason for wearing a dress like that.”

“Not really,” Nicci said with a smile. “Mostly just to piss him off.”

“Nicci!”

“I’m joking, brother – of course I have a reason.” She picked up her handbag and flipped open the clasp. “My heavy weaponry – or at

least whatever I could salvage together – is in here. My Uzi will be in my coat. My wand is inside my glove, and my knife and cell phone are concealed in pockets in my skirt. Nobody will ever suspect in an outfit like this that I have weapons besides the Uzi – and coat check will find that straightaway.”

“What if they have magical sensors?” Potter asked suspiciously, fingering his own wand. Both his suit jacket and Draco’s had pockets big enough for their wands. “They’ll pick up all the magic you have on you.”

“Hardly,” Nicci said evenly. “There’s a very good reason why the Undetectable Extension Charm is *undetectable*. Not only physically, but by magic too.”

Draco nodded. “That’s clever. So what’s the plan for this escapade?”

Ginny checked the digital clock. “It’s close to five thirty. What time does the club open?”

“Around eight, but the important people don’t show up until around ten. So that gives us enough time to get a good dinner before we go the club. Now, I still need to get to the Southwark Cathedral before the werewolf gets there to place my safeguards. That means I need to be there between nine and eleven. Given travel time, you three will be on your own for some time in the club while I handle that. Then, I’ll be back to the club to meet with K-Crank, and then get back for the meeting with Lupin.”

“You should take one of us to the Cathedral,” Potter said darkly. “You need backup.”

“I work better on my own, like my brother,” Nicci replied, nodding to Draco. “And frankly, Potter, you’d only get in the way. No offense or anything, but you wouldn’t be able to help me with the magic there.”

“None taken,” Harry replied through gritted teeth.

“So what do you want us to do while you are out laying down your safeguards?” Ginny asked, picking up her own handbag.

Nicci only shrugged. "Be social, talk to people, make contacts, dance, and try not to get killed. It shouldn't be that hard."

"It's not as easy as you make it out to be," Draco muttered, noticing Potter and Ginny's blank and slightly panicked looks.

"I know that, so that's why *you're* in charge."

"What?" Potter, Ginny, and Draco all exclaimed at the same time. A chill went down Draco's spine as he saw Nicci's smug smile. *She's doing this to get back at me, I know it!*

"You can't put me in charge, Nicci."

"You can't put *him* in charge, Nicci!"

"Draco's the one that has the most experience in these settings, so that's why he's in charge," Nicci said firmly, looking right into Potter's aghast eyes. "It's also meant to keep him from getting as drunk as he did last night."

"That's not called for."

"I don't care, brother. That's the way it is." Nicci folded her arms across her chest. "Here's your chance for responsibility, Draco. Take it or leave it."

Draco swallowed hard as he looked into Nicci's icy eyes, so much like his own. *You'll pay for this someday, sister*, he thought. Yet even in the back of his mind, he was already thinking... plans, strategies and instructions for Ginny and Potter... planning tactics...

Finally, he clenched his jaw. "I'll take it."

"Good. Now, our limo arrives in fifteen minutes, so we should be going downstairs," Nicci said efficiently, checking the clock.

Potter's mouth dropped open. "You got a *limousine*?"

"Just for tonight. Oh, stop gaping, Potter, they're very comfortable and rather cheap if you know the right people. Besides, to this kind of

party, we want to be riding in style.” With that, Nicci spun on her heel, opened the door, and moved towards the elevator. Ginny quickly followed, leaving Potter and Draco alone in the hotel room.

“So this is how it is,” Potter said, after a long pause. “We’re finally on the same side.”

“Only courtesy of my sister,” Draco replied sharply. “Believe me, neither of us think that this will be a recurring thing.”

“Good. I just want to make one thing very clear to you: keep your eyes off of Ginny. I know your intentions, Malfoy.” Potter looked absolutely dangerous when he said this.

Draco held up his hands. “She’s all yours, Harry.” *She’ll find a better person, I guarantee it, but that’s not the point. I want no part of that decision.*

Potter’s eyes suddenly narrowed. “You called me Harry.”

Draco inwardly swore – he hadn’t intended to – but he could fix that easily. “I figured that if we’re going to be working together, we should be on a first-name basis,” he replied with an easy smile. “My name, by the way, is Draco. So let’s call it a deal, shall we? We’ll call each other by our first names, you’ll listen to my advice, and I’ll stay away from Ginny. Do we have an accord?” He stretched out his hand.

Potter looked long and hard at his hand – the last time that hand had been offered was nearly eight years ago – before he cautiously shook it.

“Capital,” Draco said with a wide smile as he turned and walked out of the hotel room, despite his own nervous feelings. *It’s a new step*, he counseled himself, even as he tried to blot out the pictures of his horrified and furious parents and relatives looking down upon him for his treason. *I’m advancing. It’s a new age.*

Harry could only stare down at his hands as he walked out of the room, as if he had shaken hands with the devil and was still unsure of whom that devil was.

Chapter 9

It was an old, rather decrepit-looking office, but to Clifford Thomas, it was *his* station, his headquarters, and to some degree, his home.

Magically concealed in an abandoned Dover warehouse, it had a single, multi-paneled window covered by streaked glass and cracked blinds. The floor was linoleum, scuffed and dirty, while the paint on the red-brick walls was cracked and peeling. The desk in the center of the office was chipped and charred in spaces, and the few cabinets arranged around the room were poorly finished and looked as if they had been purchased from a junkyard.

In spite of all this, Cliff loved his office. In his comfortable chair (the best piece of furniture in the entire room), he had access to dozens of private signals and exclusive telephone lines. From his battered laptop computer (enhanced with stolen technology to be compatible with magic) he could trace magical signals and utilize both the Muggle internet and the Wizarding Auranet (the newest innovation to come from the American wizards halfway across the world). From his seat, he could even secretly tap into the Magical Aural Perception.

It was his control nexus, and he knew very well that the League needed him more than ever.

It was late afternoon when he heard the knock on the door. Cliff frowned slightly – Dean wasn't going to be back yet from his training – but he gave a sharp, shrill whistle anyway.

The door cracked open, and a haggard figure stumbled in, running his hands through his graying hair.

Cliff cocked an eyebrow. "I thought I told you to call, Remus."

"I did, so to speak, but we needed to talk in person," Remus Lupin replied hastily, closing the door with a low whistle of his own. He slumped into the chair and put his scarred hand to his face. "And I just got back from a League meeting."

Cliff sighed. “How bad was it this time? Did you get the scoop from our ambassador to Washington?”

“We had interference there, he claims, but in my opinion, I think it was pure incompetence that bungled that operation,” Remus snarled, looking up at Cliff. “Alastor Moody was the other delegate – there’s no surprise that there would be hostility in some amount – but you’d think that at least *something* would be accomplished. Or at least that we didn’t backslide. But of course, our *wonderful* diplomat screwed up again. Moody won’t even speak to us now.”

Cliff closed his laptop with a snap as he considered Remus’ remarks. Alastor Moody had been one of the first Aurors to leave Britain after the Purges. *I would have been right behind him if it wasn’t for Dean*, Cliff thought, remembering how his son had barely been able to walk. *When Sheila left me, I needed to take care of him... otherwise I would have left...*

From everything that Cliff had heard, Moody’s escape from Britain had not been clean. Having forcibly severed ties with the magical government in Britain, the Auror sought refuge in the United States. The American Magical Congress had been eager to accept the veteran Auror, and his rise in their National Security Association had been meteoric. *If he was the one that was assigned as the negotiator with the League*, he mused, *that must mean that the NSA is at least considering our offers...*

But old hatreds ran deep. Cliff knew better than anyone the bitterness between Moody and certain other League members made any sort of negotiations absolute hell. After the feud that shattered the initial sanctity of the League, Moody had been reluctant to negotiate with either side. Some hatreds just ran too deep.

“So what else?” Cliff asked, changing the subject as he leaned back in his chair. “What else went wrong? I told you Fenrir’s back in town – is he after Rosier’s blood or does he have news?”

“Both,” Remus replied with a sigh, “and that presents problems. The *Wil-Esarn* are having some success in disrupting Operation Norway, but the Finland Project is still going full swing. They need greater firepower if they’re going to take down *that* project.”

“So why did they send Fenrir back here, then?” Cliff asked, running his hand over his shaved scalp. “He’s one of their best.”

“According to him, he’s back on *Wil-Esarn* business, but I think that it’s personal. He wants Rosier’s blood, after what was done to his family.” Remus sighed. “There’s nothing that’ll stop Fenrir Greyback when he’s like this. He’s a broken man on a mission, and he’s desperate enough to try anything.”

“Hard to believe he once was the most violent werewolf in Britain,” Cliff remarked disinterestedly. Remus nodded – they knew what had happened to Greyback’s family. When the Others had inexplicably turned on Fenrir Greyback, they were savage in the extreme. Cliff, Remus, and Regulus Black had only gotten to the ruined Greyback estate in time enough to save Fenrir’s life.

“You know well enough the question that comes up next,” Remus said after a few seconds of silence. “Do we help him?”

“You want to,” Cliff stated bluntly.

“Besides the fact that he’s a fellow League member –”

“Fat lot *that* means.”

“I know, but we’re comrades. We’re both werewolves who reformed, and that bond runs deep. And I understand his fervor. He deserves this chance at revenge.” Remus put his face in his hands. Cliff understood completely. Remus was walking a very fine line here – he knew any mission that Fenrir would want to execute would *never* be condoned by the League, and if Remus wanted to aid him, he’d have to act alone. Cliff knew that feeling.

“Speaking of acting out, did you mention to the League about our mysterious arrivals?” Cliff asked, changing the subject.

“No, but I think a few of them know something’s up,” Remus replied harshly, looking up at Cliff. “And you know who those few are.”

“I didn’t authorize his hack on the network,” Cliff said sharply. “He’s smart enough to do it himself.”

“Well, he asked me why I don’t have a dead Shiy-Mord to haul into the League meeting room.” Remus snorted. “Talk about an awkward conversation.”

“He should know enough not to mention that sort of thing,” Cliff growled, disgust heavy in his voice. “So he knows about the meeting tonight?”

“No, thankfully. I’ve already laid the glyphs over the area around Southwark – I just need you to bypass the League and channel the activation energy.”

Cliff gave a low whistle, tuned just low enough that it didn’t activate any of the technology in his cabinets. “You’re getting closer and closer to insubordination, Remus. I hope that this is worth it.”

“It is!” Remus said forcefully, rising to his feet. “Those four... I don’t know what’s different about them, but there’s *something* there. For the craziest reason, I feel that I know them somehow, but whenever I try to bring the memories to mind, I can’t think of them. All I know is that they could prove to be of aid in our fight.”

“Do you think that they are trustworthy?”

“Loaded question, Cliff Thomas. How do you define trustworthy?”

“Do you think they will be reliable?”

“They’re capable, for sure,” Remus muttered. “That black-haired bitch nearly killed me last night in the club. If we want to put her on combat duty against IT or the Others, she’d be a strong ally.”

“That’s one. What about the other three?”

“If they’re with her, they’ll be reliable. Have you been able to tap into M.A.P. enough to track them?”

Cliff winced as he flipped open his laptop. “I hacked into the server, but I can’t trace any signal that they might have. It’s almost as if they’re on an entirely different aural frequency...”

Remus froze. “Aural frequency... that could be it.”

“What are you talking about?”

The werewolf began pacing. “Think about it. The Others haven't silenced them yet. Hell, I don't even think they've been noticed by anybody except me! Somehow, they might have a different aural frequency that allows them to escape detection. It might even explain why any Tracer Hexes I try to put on them slide off like water. Wands are built to operate on certain magical frequencies – that could be it!”

“Hold on, Remus, don't get too hasty here,” Cliff cautioned. “As far as we know, all wizards release the same aural frequency. How could they have altered it?”

“They said they came from somewhere else – maybe they came from overseas! From everything I've heard, the crazy wizards in the western states in America were experimenting with something like it. Maybe *they're* responsible.”

“But that raises a bunch of questions by itself: how? When? Why would the Yanks be interested in sending unidentifiable agents into our territory?”

“We can add that to the list of questions to ask them,” Remus replied, real excitement filling his voice. “Hell, this could be the answer. It all makes sense!”

Cliff shook his head. “I dunno, Remus. There are a lot of variables that we don't know yet. And you still haven't met with them yet.”

“But if I *am* right, then they could be an asset.” Remus placed both hands on Cliff's desk and leaned over, looking down at his friend. “Cliff, you *have* to help me here! You're the only one who can!”

Cliff looked uncomfortable as he pondered the issue, as Remus held his breath. Finally, after a tense few seconds, the dark man sighed. “Fine. I'll release the energy. But I'm going with you as backup here. The last thing I need is for you to get caught in a Yank trap – this could just be a response team that Moody sent to exact revenge for that disastrous meeting in Washington.”

"This isn't Moody's style," Remus replied confidently. "He would want to take revenge personally. And I have no problems with you going as backup – in fact, I was going to ask you about that."

"Who else are you taking?"

"Just you, so far," Remus admitted. "I was thinking about asking Fenrir if he wanted to, but I know you're a bit uncomfortable with him."

"If he acts on long-range patrol, I don't have a problem with him coming," Cliff replied guardedly. "But he acts out... Well, you're in charge of him in that case. The last thing we need is something to go wrong. And all the details are classified – they don't leave this office. The last thing we need is for the League to interfere."

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Little did Cliff know that a small wire inside one of his cabinets ran to a deeper, windowless room in the same warehouse, where a single, dark-haired figure was listening intently. With a dark grin, he flicked off the speaker and got to his feet.

"So, Moony, you don't want the League to know about your little mission," Sirius whispered to himself. "But I'm intrigued too – we can't *afford* to leave the League out this time, old friend. I think James would like to know about this little escapade too."

He got to his feet, already envisioning the look of shock and fury on Lupin's face when he and James crashed their little party.

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"It might not be as good as a broomstick," Draco drawled lazily, relaxing against the sleek leather seats inside the limousine, "but *this* is certainly a fine way to travel. I must ask, why hasn't *anybody* from the magical population *utilized* these vehicles? Clearly they are a luxurious mode of transportation."

"Witches and wizards probably haven't utilized limos because they've never been inside any," Nicci replied caustically, shifting awkwardly in her own seat.

“Still, this is something I really think my father would appreciate. It might be Muggle technology, but it has a certain glamour about it that overshadows that fact.” Draco smiled contentedly, almost as if he was in the comfort of his own home.

Harry looked awkwardly away, choosing to stare out the windows instead. The sun was down, and they were nearing the brightly-lit core of London. Harry had never been to this section of London after dark before, and he was intrigued by what it would be like. *Especially considering*, he thought with a jolt, *that it's been ten years since I would have even had a chance to look – or at least see a present view of the city.*

He turned back towards the inside of the limo, where Draco was still expounding on the potential possibilities of buying limousines for rich magical families. Despite Harry's own distaste, he had to admit that Draco's idea had a certain style to it. *He's always floated in different circles – it's no surprise that he considers these things and I don't. Of all of them, it seems that he's taken the whole adjustment to the future the best. Maybe that's because he wanted a change so much anyways...*

He turned back towards Nicci, where she was still fidgeting with her skirt. Next to her, Ginny smiled with a hint of patience, and Harry couldn't help but to grin back. *Nicci's not used to this sort of thing*, he thought, *and it's bothering her that Ginny's adjusting better to it than she is.*

He clenched his fist as he turned away. Despite his own attempts, he *hadn't* been adjusting well at all. Admittedly, he had been used to the Muggle life before his arrival in the new time, but the life he had lived had been limited and contained to a few square blocks around Privet Drive. He hadn't traveled like Nicci, or had been so willing to embrace a new image like Ginny...

Harry swallowed hard when his mind turned to Ginny. Their reunion at Hogwarts after the Battle had been heartfelt, but abortive. He had so much to tell her, so many things to say, but the words always stuck in his throat. Despite everything, he could never really get the words out. He wanted to talk about how much he'd missed her, how

sorry he was that she couldn't come, how relieved he was that the War was finally over, how sad he was that Fred was dead...

But it wasn't as if Ginny *wanted* him to talk much – she knew that the war was still fresh on his mind – but he *needed* somebody to talk to. Hermione and Ron had acted understanding, but he *needed* Ginny's patience and willingness to hear him out. He had been thrilled that she had decided to move into Grimmauld Place with him and the others, but even there, he could never really *talk*.

So he occupied himself. He drove Voldemort and the War out of his mind with new plans and thoughts. He planned to have the Elder Wand properly hidden and agonized over a good hiding place.

Then came the Orb of Dreams, and now I'm here, in our future.

The fact that they were walking in a future world disturbed him. It felt surreal, that he was in a place, doing things, that *hadn't happened yet*. It was chilling – and horrifying. The image of the charred ruins of Grimmauld Place sprung to mind immediately.

Relax, he thought sternly. Once I get back to my own time, I can make sure it doesn't happen. Hell, once I get back there, maybe I'll find out that Lupin and Tonks are alive after all!

All of a sudden, fresh images of Lupin rose to the forefront of his mind complete with the confusion and suspicion that inflamed him, but Harry shoved the dark memory out of his thoughts. *Maybe he's just hurt or Confused somehow. Maybe that's why he doesn't remember me...*

He turned towards Ginny again. She was bearing up remarkably well, given the terrible news that Lupin had given her. *Maybe she's realized that Mr. Weasley and Percy can be saved once we get back*, he thought uneasily, *but she could be hiding. With her new image, it's not as if she'd tell me...*

He clenched his fist again. He loved Ginny deeply, and only wanted what was best for her. And despite all of Ginny's whispered reassurances and explanations, he still was unsettled by her

transformation. *It's almost as if she darkened herself*, he thought with a twinge of fear, *to hide amongst the shadows. Almost like Nicci...*

Harry forced himself not to look at the young woman, who was now having another argument with Draco about Muggle legalities. Nicci Snape had come out of nowhere for him – armed, sarcastic, and with claims that were almost impossible to believe. If it hadn't been for the private testimony of both Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy, he would never have believed Nicci's insane story.

The young woman had spent a lot of time talking with Harry during the week after the Battle, getting 'reacquainted with magical society', as she called it. Yet despite everything, Harry still sensed a guardedness that Nicci held towards him – an unwillingness to tell the entire truth. He suspected that her experiences with the Death Eaters had taught her to be private and secretive.

Despite all her claims, though, Harry didn't trust her – and he got the impression that she felt the same towards him. Strangely, he didn't understand *why* he didn't trust her, but he had his suspicions. *It's almost as if she threw her morals out the window and only managed to grab a few on the ground when she went outside. She lies easily, and she's got a dark streak a mile wide, even deeper than Draco's. She's morbid, cynical, bitter, and undeniably dangerous – and worst of all, it seems like she despises me.* He rubbed the side of his nose where Nicci had pistol-whipped him. He was amazed his nose had healed so easily, but Ginny was a fine hand with minor healing spells. *She's certainly has no trouble using brute force... She's most definitely Severus' sister...*

He sighed heavily and stared out the window at the passing buildings. He missed Ron and Hermione, no matter how much he tried to deny it. *Why didn't they register to the damned thing?* he thought, frustrated. *We – I – could use them right now. At least they'd be a moderating influence on Nicci...*

The limo's brakes squealed on the wet pavement, and the vehicle shuddered to a stop. Harry turned to see the towering building, lined with fluorescent lights.

“That’s our stop,” Nicci said contentedly, shoving open the door. She quickly got out onto the wet pavement – it had drizzled a bit during the evening – and onto the sidewalk. She turned back to the others. “Come on, it’s time.”

Ginny was next out, followed by Draco. Harry hesitated for a second, but at Draco’s exasperated call, he followed quickly, smoothing his shirt and jacket out as he went.

“So what now?” Ginny asked, her eyes scanning the soaring building. “What floor is this ‘club’ on?”

“The top floor,” Nicci replied, trying to keep the exasperation out of her voice. “Where else?”

“But how do we even get *inside*?” Draco asked, confusion evident in his tone as he stared at the building. “There’s no door!”

Nicci flushed slightly and pointed. “There it is. It’s glass-paneled and might be a bit hard to see, but it’s there.”

“I don’t see a door,” Draco replied flatly. “No hinges, sister.”

Nicci flushed, and muttering imprecations against Draco, she walked straight at the building. Suddenly, with a low whirl, the panels of glass parted to the sides, allowing Nicci direct entrance into the foyer of the building.

She turned slightly and smirked at the three astonished expression. “Sliding doors – they became all the rage in the Muggle world.”

Draco recovered quickly. “I know what a sliding door is, Nicci? Do you think I’m stupid or something?”

Nicci rolled her eyes with exasperation as she spun and advanced into the foyer. The other three followed slowly, their eyes nervously scanning every inch of the room. Instead of marble lining the floors, it was scuffed linoleum, and instead of paneled walls lined with granite, they were covered by shiny, asymmetrical metal and glass plates.

Nicci headed towards the desk with confidence. A single, bespectacled white man sat behind the counter, with two burly black fellows in dark uniforms stood behind him.

“We’re here for entrance upstairs,” Nicci said, flashing a smile as she flicked back her hair. Harry could see the guards’ eyes follow her every motion with an expression that seemed less than appropriate.

The bespectacled man didn’t even look up. “Club’s exclusive, we don’t just let everyone in –”

Nicci slapped a piece of paper on the desk in one smooth motion, all mirth gone from her face. “Will this suffice?” she asked dangerously.

“If it doesn’t, my bets are on the guards,” Harry anxiously whispered to Draco.

“Not a chance. She’s faster than them, and she’ll drop all three of ‘em like bricks before they get out from behind the counter.”

The bespectacled man, completely oblivious to the spurious betting going on behind Nicci, looked at the paper slowly before handing it back to her. “Coat check’s upstairs – that paper’s enough to get you upstairs, but you need to *know* people if you want full clearance.” His cool eyes raked Nicci’s figure lecherously. “Although in your case, it shouldn’t be too difficult. Nor for your red friend back over there.” He gestured at Ginny with a small black key, who scowled viciously at him as she flushed as red as her hair.

Nicci didn’t even flush as she slid the paper into her purse and took the key from the man’s hand. “I’ll make sure we deal with that.” She spun on her heels and headed straight towards the elevator. “Come on,” she said sharply, without even turning around. Harry, despite himself, swallowed hard. Nicci was good at containing her anger, but it seemed that the man’s comment had pushed her over the edge.

When they all had gotten into the elevator and it had closed, Nicci didn’t press any buttons. Instead, she shoved the key into a tiny slot beneath the emergency button and twisted. With a jolt, the elevator began rising quickly.

“Filthy scumbag,” Nicci muttered. Harry knew better than to make any remarks, but he could understand the bespectacled man’s reaction downstairs. Nicci *did* look appealing to the eyes.

Stop it, he sternly warned himself. You’re with Ginny. And Nicci’s too old and too dark for you anyways. Let some other fool deal with her.

In what seemed like no time, the elevator slid open to reveal an opulent foyer, lined with dark granite and purple carpets. Several mirrors lined the walls, not to mention the guards that drifted throughout the hall.

Nicci strode straight towards the doors at the end of the hall, her jaw set, ignoring all the gazes of the guards and the few well-dressed men walking down the hall. She reached the doors, only to find her way blocked by two burly men in black suits who looked as if they knew how to use their hands.

“Hold on a minute, lady. Who do you know?” the man on the left asked. He was bald and black, and wore diamond stud earrings in both ears. The other man kept silent, although his thick hands were clenched around the haft of a pistol on his belt. Harry froze and listened hard. *Nicci could reveal the names of one of her contacts here – that might come in handy.*

Nicci, for her part, sighed with exasperation. From the look on her face, Harry guessed that she was not used to being stopped by *any* sort of bodyguards, and her own hand drifted to the Uzi shoved inside her jacket.

“I’m an old friend of K-Crank,” Nicci said softly, yet the edge of ice in her voice was unmistakable. “Tell him that an old friend, a dealer agent, wants to restart a deal. Tell him it’s for Hell’s Leaves – he’ll understand.”

The bodyguards exchanged glances as they looked at the other three standing behind her. “And who are these three?” the bigger man asked, his eyes narrowing.

“Business associates,” Draco replied coolly, stepping up next to Nicci. “And that’s all *you* need to know.”

Harry swore under his breath. Draco was messing with some big fish, which were not only heavily armed, but also had high level connections with criminals. But a new thought suddenly occurred to Harry: *he's used to this. He's been dealing with flunkies and bodyguards for a long time – hell, he probably had to run the intimidation racket several times in Slytherin. That could be one of the reasons why Nicci named him leader in her absence; he's got the most experience in dealing with darkness.*

The guards' eyes narrowed. "Who do ya think you are, you little white punk?"

"None of your business," Draco retorted. "Now if you know what's good for you, I'd get you to send somebody quickly to get K-Crank. Otherwise, you both will be out of a job by moonrise. Is that clear?"

"That's not the point," the shorter guard spoke abruptly, his voice a bass rumble. "Any sort of deal that goes on with K-Crank must be done on appointment. I'm sure, if you've known him before, girl, you would have known that."

"It's urgent," Nicci hissed through gritted teeth, and Harry could see her hand drifting towards the Uzi in her jacket. Ginny saw it too and tensed, ready for a fight if necessary. "There was no time for an appointment."

"K-Crank is also not interested in dealing with little scumbags who can't offload their stock quickly enough," the shorter guard spat. "Tough luck, girl. Give me a better reason."

Harry was suddenly struck with an inspiration. "Tell K-Crank that there's more to it than that."

The guards turned to Harry, and he felt his guts melting with terror. "And who might you be?" the taller guard asked menacingly.

Harry knew that he wouldn't win if he went on the defensive, so he swallowed hard and looked the bigger man in his dark eyes.

"Tell K-Crank it's about his brother."

The guards both stiffened abruptly, and their eyes widened. “How do you know the boss’ brother?”

Harry shrugged, trying to keep up his bluff – he had no idea where Kingsley really was in this time period, but if the guards knew him and were afraid, he might be able to keep up the act. “He’s an old friend of mine... we’re old comrades, so to speak.”

The guards exchanged nervous glances, and after a tense few seconds, they finally shoved open the door. “Coat check’s immediately to your immediate left, bar’s to the far left, and the stage is to the far right. Have a nice night.”

Harry exhaled as he began walking towards the coat check. He noticed that the guards seemed very wary – and very careful to avoid touching any of the group. *I must have really scared them*, he thought.

Draco caught up to him while Nicci and Ginny checked their coats. “Nicci’s going to kill you.”

“Why? I got us in, didn’t I?”

“You got us in, all right – in over our heads!” Draco’s eyes narrowed with anger. “What were you *thinking*, mentioning a wizard to those two? From the looks on their faces, they would have fainted if Shackbolt showed up himself - obviously he has some stature in the Muggle world that we’ve overlooked. And what were you *thinking* by giving those guards a wizard’s name?”

“I got us in, all right?” Harry retorted defensively, trying not to meet Draco’s eyes and to quell the queasy feeling that was beginning to fill his stomach. “Nothing Nicci would have said would have gotten us in – it was the only way.”

“You should have let me keep bluffing,” Draco muttered, turning away with disgust and a degree of disappointment. “I could have handled it.”

“Or you could have gotten shot in the head by the Glocks that the guards were holding under their jackets,” Nicci snapped, joining the conversation. “It was careless of you to do that, Harry, and if there’s a

rift between Keith and Kingsley that gets us all killed, I'll let you know now that it was *your* fault."

"What's done is done, Nicci," Ginny interceded quietly. "Now let's go find out where we're sitting tonight."

"I already ate a good dinner," Draco protested, "and I'm still savouring it. Why would you ruin it by feeding me another?"

"It's just to watch the show, Draco, relax," Ginny replied with a sigh. "Not to actually eat –"

"Excuse me, sirs and madams, would you have recently arrived here?" a voice interrupted. They turned to see a neatly dressed, dark-haired man with a small goatee and beard. He was wearing a white suit and carrying a tray of drinks that Harry guessed were *very* potent.

"Yes, we did," Draco replied carefully, elbowing Harry out of the way to be in better view. "Can we be of assistance?"

The man nodded promptly and gestured towards the stage. "Mr. K-Crank has told me that he desires your company over dessert tonight. He wishes to enquire privately about his brother, of which you said you had information."

Nicci closed her eyes and sighed heavily, looking as if she were restraining herself from throttling Harry. Draco, for his part, smiled widely, but the flash in his eyes was clear evidence of his anger.

"We'll be there, sir."

"Splendid. Now, I'm sure you were aware that the show starts at nine o'clock sharp. The booth right of the stage, to the far side, that is where you will be seated. K-Crank will be at the booth by 8:45 and I'd advise," the man lowered his voice, "that you be there a bit early. He doesn't like to be kept waiting."

Draco's smile only broadened. "We'll be there. Oh, and sir?"

The man turned back. "Yes?"

“What kind of drink does Mr. K-Crank tend to favour?” Draco asked, sliding something into the man’s hand. Harry frowned at Draco’s question even as he pondered his gesture. *Why is that even relevant?*

“Double shot of Cuban Tequila with oranges, no limes,” the man and Nicci both answered at the same time, albeit Nicci’s response was under her breath. *How did she know?* Harry thought with confusion. *No, wait... of course she knew. If she dealt with K-Crank in the past, she would be used to drinking with him.*

Draco smiled in response. “Thank you. Could you see to it that Mr. K-Crank’s drink is available for him when he comes to our table?”

The man nodded with understanding. “My pleasure, sir.” With that, he walked away to speak to the growing crowd coming into the club.

“What was that all about?” Ginny asked quietly, out of earshot.

“Good social graces,” Draco replied easily, snagging a glass of water from a nearby table and taking a swig. “When courting a man of higher stature than oneself, it is always best to buy him a drink. If he is a man of character or he is pleased with your gesture, he will return the favour when he gets the drink. If he’s not, or he’s displeased by your presence, he won’t buy you a drink.”

“So how can you tell if he’s pleased or if he’s a man of character?” Harry asked, trying to follow Draco’s logic.

Draco shrugged. “Price of the drink, usually. If he gets us *all* drinks – not just me – then it would show that he’s both a man of character *and* pleased with the gesture.”

“And you paid off the waiter because..?” Harry pursued, his eyes narrowing. “I’m assuming you gave him money.”

“Plenty of it, actually,” Draco replied with a wince. “Another good trick. If you tip your waiters and servers well – except when they’re house-elves, that is – they won’t hesitate to give you good service. I gave that man enough money that he’ll be willing to serve us all night.”

Nicci nodded with understanding – which put her far ahead of Harry and Ginny, who exchanged confused glances. “And most waiters know the usual crowd, so they’re a good source of information on guests and placements. Nice work, brother.”

“I haven’t even started yet,” Draco muttered, pulling a program out from under a napkin on the table, flipping it open, and scanning it quickly. “Apparently, this event happening tonight is some sort of musical number – I don’t think we’ll be expected to dance, which is a relief. Our seats are *very* good, from the looks of things, which implies that K-Crank values what we have to say – a *lot*. By Merlin, I hope you can bluff well, Harry, because we’re going to need it.”

Harry swallowed hard as the panic roiled in his gut. “I wasn’t counting on it going this far. I’m sorry –”

“Save it, Potter, we can handle it,” Nicci replied briskly, snagging a small drink from a passing waiter and sipping it. “This speeds up our timetable a bit – I didn’t expect to meet with K-Crank so quickly. However, we don’t know how long this presentation’s going to be...”

“We stay as long as K-Crank is at the table,” Draco interrupted, his voice deadly even. “That’s good manners. Remember – this is a *business* reception. That means that as the host, K-Crank holds the most power here. Now, there’s a possibility there’ll be other MKT members at the table – likely bodyguards or even high-ranking members.”

Ginny clenched her fist, her eyes following a few members in the crowd. “We’re about to have company, people. Party of two, at three o’clock.”

Harry turned first, his eyes falling on two men in crisp black suits. They both looked distinctively uncomfortable (an expression Harry fervently hoped that was *not* on his face), but their eyes were fixed on the group. One, a shorter, ratty fellow with a thick mustache, was only looking at Ginny. The other, a truly enormous man with thick blonde hair and beady eyes, kept his eyes on the crowd with a manner that made Harry suspect that he was paying far more attention to them than he seemed to. They both were young – Harry guessed their

ages between ten and fifteen years older than him – but they both had a severity to their expressions that made them look even older.

“Pardon me, sirs, madams, but I couldn’t help overhearing that you had business with our host tonight,” the ratty man said with a toothy smile that Harry knew was false. “What utterly shocks me is that, by some twist of fate, *I* have been waiting for a meeting with our host for months and you four get a *private* liaison on no notice at all.”

“Well, perhaps our issues are just more important than yours,” Ginny replied, her voice nearly as cold as Nicci’s.

The ratty man froze, his eyes glittering with anger. “I would *ask* then, what issue is so important that you overrode our meeting with our host.”

“I don’t want to burden you with our trouble –” Draco began.

“But it really isn’t any of your concern,” Ginny interrupted coolly. “Now, if you’d kindly excuse us...”

The ratty-looking man looked ready to explode, but the bigger fellow, who hadn’t yet said a word, laid a heavy hand on his companion’s shoulders. “Easy there, Piers. We don’t want trouble with this group.”

Harry froze. He knew that voice.

“After all,” the big man continued, a small grin spreading across his face, “if they have such important business, we wouldn’t want to *interfere*, would we? Especially given our host’s business of choice.”

Nicci cocked an eyebrow. “I’m surprised that given your knowledge of our host, you hadn’t gotten a meeting yet.”

The big man shrugged as he turned to look at Harry. “It depends, one might say, on the host’s *priorities*. The shipping conglomerate that Mr. Piers and I manage works on a long-term scale, in any case.”

Don’t give anything away! Harry thought furiously, but the effort caused him to grit his teeth, which he forced into a painful smile. “So

how is your business proceeding?" he asked lightly, praying that the big man hadn't yet recognized the wizard.

"We are a burgeoning company, albeit small," the big man replied, with a disturbing air of familiarity that sent a chill down Harry's spine. "Mostly Channel business, although we are expanding into the North Sea. Would you have any business interests that extend northward? We do a considerable amount of shipping to Norway, Denmark, Finland, and even Russia. The retreating polar ice might be a burden to some, but it is only making arctic shipping that much easier."

Harry thought frantically. *I need to get better at bluffing, before I open my mouth!* "Not especially. I doubt that you would be willing to take any cargo from my dealers, anyhow."

Nicci tensed, her hand sliding to her skirt – and the knife concealed inside it. Her icy eyes told Harry something he already knew: *get out of the conversation before you get yourself killed!* But the big man had paused, scratching his thick chin thoughtfully.

"We do tend to specialize in shipping construction equipment, but we could adapt, depending on the arrangements," the big man said slowly, after a long pause.

"But all payments must be done in advance," Mr. Piers spoke up, his nervous eyes noticing the casual, yet feigned exchange between the two speakers.

"I can handle that," Harry replied evenly, trying to ignore the lump the size of a boulder in his stomach. "If you could..."

"Of course," the big man replied, guessing Harry's intent as he pulled out a small business card. He slapped it in Harry's hand, and he could feel another scrap of paper behind it. "Call me if you are interested in making any deals."

"I will," Harry promised, the queasy feeling beginning to fade as the two men stepped away.

Nicci took two steadying breathes. “Potter,” she said evenly, “if you ever open your mouth like you did there, I will personally make sure you *never* open it again. What were you *thinking*?”

“Plenty,” Harry shot back, picking up a glass of water from the table and taking a heavy drink. The refreshing liquid was a stark contrast to the sweat running down his back. “We made a contact – isn’t that what you wanted, Nicci?”

Ginny opened her fist. “Harry, you obviously knew those two – *how*?”

Harry flipped up the business card and handed it to Draco. “Read the name of the company name.”

Draco squinted down at the relatively plain card. “Polkiss & Dursley Corporate Transportation, Inc.” He looked up, confused. “What’s so special about this?”

Ginny went pale. “Dursley... was that the name of...”

“Yes,” Harry replied, another chill running down his spine. “The big one... I knew him. That was my cousin – that’s who he’ll be in ten years. Dudley Dursley will own his company in ten years – and for some reason, he wants to deal with K-Crank.”

Draco swore violently and took another deep drink of his water. “Do you think he recognized you?”

Harry swallowed hard. “I don’t know what game he was playing, but I couldn’t tell if he knew me or not. What do you think, Nicci? Nicci...”

Nicci had gone pale and was slightly swaying on her feet. Her eyes were fixed on the newest arrival: a thickset, blond man, smoking a cigar, with four enormous bodyguards. Her hand was now gripping the knife hilt hidden in her skirt so tightly that it was discernable between the ruffles.

“Nicci, you’re staring,” Draco replied, a note of panic entering his voice. “Turn away and tell me who he is.”

Nicci looked away, her eyes gleaming with shock – and fury. “I must have taken the wrong man... damn, I should have checked the body...”

“Nicci, *who is he?*”

“His name is Damion Ziani,” Nicci said quietly, putting her hand to her eyes. “He’s an Italian wizard-smuggler. He double-crossed me during the luhix fiasco.”

“But why is he so special?” Harry asked, already guessing the answer. The queasy feeling in his stomach – a very good sign that he knew something had gone terribly wrong – was only getting bigger. “A better question: why is he still alive?”

“He’s not,” Nicci whispered, moving her hand away from her eyes, and Harry was startled to see the look of fury there. “I killed him.”

“Well, he’s looking awfully good for a dead man,” Draco said conversationally. “How, ah, exactly did you kill him, Nicci?”

“I blew the back of his head off with my submachine gun,” Nicci hissed through gritted teeth, keeping her voice down.

“Oh,” Draco said, his aplomb gone as he got a closer look at Ziani. “He’s looking *really* good then.”

“It’s not making sense,” Ginny muttered, her eyes fixed on Ziani. “If he’s really Ziani, why doesn’t he look older, like Harry’s cousin?”

“Lupin didn’t even look older,” Harry noted, with a jolt. “He looked... well, the age he was when I last saw him.”

“Ten years have definitely passed,” Nicci said, breathing quickly as she caught another glance at Ziani – he was heading towards the bar. “I’ve checked the date a dozen times – it is definitely the future.”

“Then why hasn’t anybody aged?” Ginny asked, confusion and anger filling her voice.

It was almost as if a floodgate burst in Harry's skull. He turned to look at Ginny, understanding in his eyes. "But people have aged. Everybody without magic *has* aged. People with magic haven't – I don't know how, but somehow they've managed to stop ageing."

Nicci looked suspicious, but both Draco and Ginny looked flabbergasted. "You know, Harry, that could be the answer," the blond wizard said with a growing grin. "Nice work. I think I should buy you a drink for that logical work."

"But we don't know enough," Harry said, angling himself towards the side wall as he walked, into the shadows. "We don't know how the wizards might have been able to do it."

"The werewolf mentioned something called 'the Torrent,' Nicci mused aloud, letting go of her knife hilt as she took another drink. "That might have been that de-ageing magic that they used..."

"We need more proof," Ginny said firmly, as she crossed her arms over her chest. "We need to actually talk to K-Crank –"

"I think I just heard somebody speak my name," a deep, sinuous voice said from behind Ginny. Nicci and Draco smiled almost automatically as Ginny turned, but Harry could only stare at the man walking out of the shadows, flanked by two bodyguards in grey suits. Tall, bald, and black-skinned, K-Crank struck a remarkably different pose than that of his brother in his flamboyant white suit. Harry didn't remember him well – he had only seen Kingsley's brother once, and that was after the Battle of Hogwarts – but he seemed slightly older, although ageing did nothing to diminish the man's good looks and shining smile – or the silver pistols shoved conveniently into his belt.

K-Crank gave a warm smile to the group. "Well, well, I don't recall seeing any of *your* faces before, although you certainly are welcome to our little gathering here tonight. I believe my men at the doors said *you*," he pointed at Harry with a ringed finger, "were the one with the news, so I'll ask your name first."

Harry tried to mimic the other man's easy smile, but it was nowhere near as easy with the worsened state of his stomach. "Harry Potter," he said, shaking K-Crank's hand.

K-Crank's smile seemed to freeze for a second before widening. "Are you really? I bet you have *quite* the story to tell here, and I'm looking forward to hearing all of it. Oh, and please call me Keith, Keith Shackbolt. But of course you knew that, right?" He winked at Harry before turning to Ginny. "And who's this beautiful lady?"

"Her name's Ginny," Harry said before Ginny could speak. He opted *not* to use her last name. *If Ginny in this time period is a threat to Lupin, and Lupin's affiliated with MKT, Ginny's last name could spark something nasty.* "She's my girlfriend."

"Lucky you," Keith said, without even missing a beat as he smiled widely at Ginny, who shot Harry a strange look. He swallowed hard – he hadn't even discussed it with the possibility with Ginny of their union becoming formal. *I put it on the table, Ginny. Now you just have to go with it. We can talk about it later...*

But Harry knew he couldn't say it, so he simply looked elsewhere as Keith continued his introductions.

"You know, I remember meeting a fellow named Draco a long time ago," Keith said solemnly, all traces of mirth gone from his face. "Crazy fellow – never could stand him."

"Well, at least one could say that I'm tolerable," Draco replied bracingly, with a smirk.

"Except when it comes to bathroom usage time," Nicci muttered under her breath.

"Ah, so *this* is the girl with the sharp tongue," Keith said triumphantly, shouldering his way forward to face Nicci. "I must say, lady, you look beautiful."

Nicci cocked an eyebrow. "Out of the women that you've met tonight, how many have you told that? Thirteen, fourteen?"

"Nineteen, if you're counting the dancers," Keith replied cheerfully, even as his keen eyes traced Nicci's figure with interest. "But you're in a class all by yourself, tonight, shorty. What's your name?"

“Nicci,” she replied simply, tossing her hair back. “My name’s Nicci. Frankly, I’m surprised you don’t remember me, K-Crank.”

The gangster frowned. “I would remember a lady like you... did we ever meet?”

“Ten years ago, at the aftermath of a tense situation,” Nicci replied, her icy eyes narrowing. “Are you going to say that you don’t remember me, Keith Shacklebolt? Because I don’t think I was that forgettable.”

Keith scratched the back of his bald head. “I’m sorry, Nicci, I can’t bring to mind anything. I’ve seen plenty of beautiful women – but ten years ago you would have been, what, fourteen, fifteen?”

Nicci froze, cognizant of her mistake, but she recovered instantly. “I guess so,” she admitted. “I do remember meeting you, though. You probably wouldn’t remember me, then. So what’s the show tonight?” she asked quickly, changing the subject.

Keith smiled. “I’m glad you asked, although I am surprised that you didn’t hear ‘bout it. We have a few American artists in tonight on invite, and we’re going to hear a speech from a member of *your* government.”

The emphasis on the word ‘your’ made Harry tense. *Why is the Ministry of Magic addressing a crowd likely filled with Muggles? Why would Keith be so interested? And why would Dudley even bother to come to an event like this, even as a representative of his company? Wouldn’t it be easier to set up a meeting with Keith in private?*

“So who’s speaking tonight, then?” Draco asked, as they all moved towards the seat.

“A negotiator,” Keith said, and there was tenseness to his tone that Harry caught quickly. “Albeit of a better sort. He’s part of the Congressional Subcommittee for Governmental Affairs, and he wants to bring peace between the, ah, *conflicts* going on.”

“So who is he?” Harry asked. “We might know him.”

Keith shook his head. "I hope you don't, Mr. Potter, 'cause he's not the pleasant sort. His name is Barty Crouch, Jr."

Chapter 10

Evan Rosier could barely restrain his grin as he bowed low before the hooded man on the throne. After months of frustrating siege and infighting, there had finally been progress.

“My master, I have excellent news.”

“And I have limited time, so make it quick, Rosier,” the man on the throne growled as Rosier hastily got to his feet.

“Our men are in position. It shouldn’t be difficult to take out all the leaders of MKT in a single stroke.”

“MKT won’t fall with such a simple stroke, although a strike like that could allow the Others to capitalize on the chaos.” The man on the throne stroked his pointed chin. “That is very good news indeed.”

“That is not all,” Rosier said, trying to keep the excitement out of his voice. “We’ve received a tip – the mysterious arrivals are in the attack site.”

The man on the throne rose to his feet, his hands clenched into fists. “Are you certain?”

“Absolutely. Our agent said their appearances are unmistakable.”

“Have you informed Crouch yet?” Rosier nodded quickly, and the hooded man sat down again, a contemplative smile growing across his face. “This complicates matters slightly, but it also gives us an opportunity. Make sure our agents are capable of capture – I want these interlopers *alive*. I want to find out how they were able to bypass our security network and M.A.P.”

Rosier took a deep breath. “I will handle it personally, my master.”

--

Harry’s face had gone white the second he heard the name. *I can’t give anything away!* he thought, panicked, but try as he might, he

couldn't hold back the fear that was now roiling in his stomach. He knew about Barty Crouch Jr. – Voldemort had once called him 'his most faithful servant.'

Think, though! This doesn't make sense. Crouch was given the Dementor's Kiss on Fudge's orders, and McGonagall and Snape were both there! There couldn't have been a mistake here – Snape would have told Dumbledore immediately! Yet you can't recover from the Dementor's Kiss? How can Crouch be here?

Nicci tossed her hair back lightly; clearly she didn't recognize the name or she didn't care. "So what's Crouch speaking on?"

Keith shrugged as he stretched out his hand, inviting Nicci and the others into the booth. "Damned if I know," he replied easily, but Harry caught the catch in the gangster's voice. *He knows exactly why Crouch is here, but doesn't want to admit it to us... not without us giving him some information.*

Once the four were settled in the booth, Keith slid in on the opposite side. "Now before Crouch gives his little speech, I think you said you had some information for me." He crossed his arms over his chest. "I'll have that now."

Harry took a steadying breath. *I need to keep bluffing!* "Well, I was hoping that –"

Almost on cue, the waiter arrived, drinks sitting on his tray. Keith grinned widely when the double shot of Tequila was set in front of him. Harry opted for water – *I'll need my wits if I want to deal with Keith here.*

Keith easily drank the shot and set the glass down with a dull clunk. "Ahh, excellent. Compliments of which one of you?"

Draco smiled. "The pleasure's mine, Mr. Shackbolt."

"I told you, call me Keith. Waiter!" He snapped his finger, and the waiter, who hadn't even bothered to leave, moved closer. "A round of drinks for the group here – club specials."

The waiter shot Draco a penetrating look. Draco nodded, but under the table, where Keith couldn't see, he twisted his hand into a fist. The waiter backed away with a "Certainly, sir," and moved towards the bar. Harry was perplexed – what was the signal that Draco had given the waiter?

"Well, now that drinks are settled, I think I'd like my information," Keith said, all traces of mirth gone from his face.

Harry clenched his hands into fists under the table. "Perhaps I should ask *you* for an explanation first, though. You seemed intrigued when you heard my name, and I'm curious why."

"What does this have to do with the information about Kingsley?" Keith asked coolly, although Harry could catch the edge in his voice.

Harry desperately searched for words, but Nicci cut in quickly.

"It's a matter of trust, Keith. You know the procedure. Harry's just implying by the way you responded to his name implies that you do not exactly trust him, and by extension his information. Harry wants you to be sure that there is implicit trust."

"That's an old Sicilian mob code," Keith said evenly. "I'm surprised that you'd know it. Few know *that* code anymore."

"Enough do," Nicci retorted, "and in a case where the information is valuable, trust must be implicit. After all, we aren't petty thugs, are we?"

Keith stared at Nicci for a few seconds before breaking out into booming laughter. He banged his ringed fist on the table, he laughed so hard. Nicci gave a triumphant smirk.

"Nicci, Nicci, where have *you* been in the past years? I could have used a person like you in the high administrations of IT or the Others years ago, before this whole gang war broke out. It's a pity that the cultured approach only goes so far with those two gangs of thugs. It might work with negotiations with the Triad or with the Hell's Angels, but MKT plays a much rougher game than that these days."

Nicci flushed slightly. "I've been out of the circuit for a few years. Forgive me if my criminal knowledge isn't entirely up to date."

"This isn't just criminal knowledge, shorty, but the entire shape of the world. It's changed since the old days." The waiter arrived with another double shot for Keith and the other drinks – all drinks that Harry was sure were filled with high concentrations of alcohol. But Keith did not drink yet – his eyes were fixed on Nicci.

"So what do you believe this degeneration has been caused by?" Draco asked coolly, taking a deep swig of the new drink in front of him. Harry could have kicked the blond wizard – *those drinks are either highly alcoholic or drugged, Draco! Don't drink!*

Keith folded his hands in front of him. "Two things. The first is globalization. With the expansion of the Internet and," he continued as he lowered his voice, "*your* Auranet, people across the world have access to more information, faster. This has led to easier communication and the growth of global commerce – both good and bad. One could say that, ah, *freelance activity* has become a business now – one that is responsible for a quarter of the world's gross domestic product." He cocked an eyebrow. "It wasn't like that years ago. The second reason has to do with American activity and the fallout of *that*. But surely you're aware of *that*." He frowned slightly at the confused looks on Ginny and Harry's faces. "You have to be. It's changed everything."

"It's not that we're unaware of the events," Draco interjected smoothly, "it's more of that we haven't yet drawn the connections yet between the events and the fallout in the criminal industry. That's what it is now, isn't it?"

"One could call it that," Keith replied with a nod, "yet without proper dignity and rules, it is nothing more than a poorly disguised mockery of culture, propelled by unchecked greed."

"Isn't that what crime always is?" Harry asked wryly, taking a sip of his water. Draco shot him a smoldering glare, but Harry didn't care – as long as he kept the subject away from Kingsley, everything could work.

"It used to be better," Keith said with a sigh, "but America adopted a culture of *convenience*, where instant gratification became natural. People over there don't like a slow, measured accumulation of power – they want it all, and as soon as possible. It has given the major families, like the Sicilians and my own group initially, quite a few problems. There's no respect for proper power development any more, and it's a bit disappointing, because in a culture of convenience... well, there's no room for culture at all, one could say."

"And where, then, does the war here come in?" Nicci asked, taking a sip of her own drink as she toyed with a napkin.

"The Others... well, I'm not at liberty to reveal much about such a group, but they have deep ties to elements of *your* world. As does IT. The 'negotiator' tonight represents a member of your government who I suspect could be affiliated with..."

"With who?" Ginny asked, her eyes narrowing suspiciously. "The Others or IT? Does the government have overt ties?"

"Why are you asking me? It's *your* government."

"But *you* know," Harry said evenly. "Give me your suspicion, if you aren't able to give more without the approval of MKT's other leaders."

Keith leaned forward, a dangerous light in his eyes. "Listen, Mr. *Potter*, there are elements of my business that you don't need to know. *That's* one of them. Frankly, your *ignorance* is astounding, and given *your* identity, I'm surprised."

"What?" Harry asked, completely baffled. "Who am I, to know?"

"Don't play stupid, Potter, you can't tell me that your father hasn't told you about the *League* and all the connections there," Keith growled, his dark eyes meeting Harry's green ones. In the corner of his eye, he saw Nicci's hand go back to the knife hilt in her skirt.

"My father died twenty-eight years ago," Harry replied angrily, "and if you knew your brother, you'd know that too."

"You say your name is Harry Potter?"

“That’s right.”

“And you say that James Potter is your father?”

“That’s right,” Harry replied defiantly.

“Then *you* are the one who has been seriously confused, because I met with James Potter not two weeks ago,” Keith said evenly. Ginny let out a gasp, cut off abruptly because Nicci had elbowed her in the ribs. “And I know him well. I don’t get along well with him, but I know him. Black was there too.”

Harry sat back, waves of shock pouring through him, his hand moving to the wand in his pocket. *He’s lying. He has to be. James Potter is dead – I saw it in Voldemort’s mind myself! Keith is lying.* “My father was –”

“Clearly you don’t even know your own father, boy,” Keith sneered, leaning back and giving Harry a deeply distrustful look. “So what’s the news from Kingsley then, providing there is any to begin with?”

“Which Black?” Draco asked unexpectedly.

Keith paused. “Sorry?”

“Which Black did you meet?”

Keith frowned. “It was Sirius Black.”

Harry felt like exploding with fury and frustration. Why was Keith mentioning people that *everybody* knew were dead?

“Was Remus Lupin there with them?”

“I don’t work with that werewolf,” Keith growled. “He’s a Renegade Phoenix, and I have no respect for that lot. And I’ve got suspicions that he’s an Ash-Born as well.”

“You think he’s a terrorist?” Nicci asked coldly, and Harry remembered the newscast from the morning – how the bomb that

Nicci had set had been blamed upon the Ash-Born. He also remembered Lupin's references to terrorism.

"It's a possibility," Keith replied, his hands clenched into fists. "And I wish I could prove it, to put those monsters behind bars. Terrorists deserve nothing less, and in most cases, a great deal more. I would have no compunctions at putting a bullet through Lupin if he's an Ash-Born, and from everything I've heard, he is. Hell, he was even spotted at that club explosion last night!"

Harry heard Nicci swear under her breath, but Keith had turned to accept a third shot from the waiter, and missed the muttered words. *And she gets on my back for getting into situations I can't control*, he thought darkly.

"I don't think Lupin's a terrorist," he began evenly.

"Did you talk to the werewolf?" Keith shot back.

"I did, as a matter of fact," Harry replied coolly. "And he didn't try to kill any of us – well, at least not at first, but anybody would have done it, given our arrival."

"And what's so special about your arrival here?" Keith asked suspiciously.

"We weren't identified at the border," Nicci spoke up unexpectedly. "We weren't met or tagged – and we would have been. They didn't even manage to stop me from blowing up that club."

Keith began to rise to his feet with a furious expression on his face. "You blew up –"

"It was a security measure, K-Crank, and I've done it before," Nicci replied sharply. "Now we're about to have company in about thirty seconds, so I expect that we change the subject before your fellow leaders begin asking awkward questions."

Harry turned to see a pair of men – both flanked by openly armed men – approach the booth. Both were tall, although they differed dramatically in appearance. One was black and well-muscled, with

lazy eyes and a wide nose. The other was Caucasian, rail-thin and unlike nearly every other person in the room, was dressed casually, in a T-shirt and black jeans. His eyes were deep green and seemed to dart around the room very quickly, as if he was trying to take in and analyze everything he saw.

Keith glared down at Nicci. "We'll talk about this later – the situation's too delicate to mention now."

"There's questions I have that need answers, K-Crank," Nicci retorted, crossing her arms over her chest. "I'm only leaving on my terms."

The gangster looked at Nicci for a few more seconds, and then turned to greet the other two men. Draco, who was closest to the edge, got up and waved over the waiter.

"Harry, come on, we should introduce ourselves," Ginny whispered tersely, nudging him quickly. He sighed, took another sip of his water, and got to his feet to meet the newest arrivals.

Draco had already introduced himself, and was smiling widely as he shook hands with the gangsters, who both eyed him with apprehension.

"Keith, you didn't tell us there'd be kids here at our booth," the black man said with a hint of surprise.

"Believe me, their arrival was as much of a surprise to me as it was to anybody else," Keith replied through gritted teeth. "Mr. Potter, Ginny, Nicci, this is Emmanuel Telph, but everyone calls him Twin. He's my American partner and responsible for all our international activities. Ms. Nicci, if you want to discuss some of your little issues, he'd have better information than I would."

Nicci shook his hand cordially. "A pleasure."

"It's all mine, shorty, it's all mine," Twin said lightly, his eyes lighting with interest on Nicci. "You certainly know how to pick 'em, K-Crank. I wish you would have told me that you were calling the service before coming..."

"I'm not his escort," Nicci said smoothly before Keith could interject an explanation. "I'm a dealer agent, and I'm looking for information at the moment."

"Baby, I would be willing to give you as much information as you desire, as long as you can pay my price," Twin said, his eyes gleaming.

Keith cleared his throat loudly. "If you two are gonna get randy, do somewhere else. For those who are still with us, this," he indicated the other gangster, "is DJ Martyr. He's in charge of MKT's legit operations, like our record labels and our deals with other labels."

"Last time I checked, I thought that was *your* job," Harry remarked sardonically.

Keith shrugged, camouflaging any anger he might have had towards Harry effortlessly. "I took over the illicit business about two years ago, so your information's outta date. They needed someone with experience to run that sector, given how much money is going in and especially given the... conflict."

"Not now, K-Crank," DJ Martyr muttered, his voice raspy. "Crouch is already here with his men. The last thing we need is any hostilities to break out here."

Keith froze, his face contorting with shock and anger. "He's early."

"That's to be expected," DJ Martyr hissed, his hands both clenched into tight fists. "He didn't bring many men, but likely they're the *special* type, if you catch my drift..." He glared suspiciously at Harry and the others.

"They are part of *that* group too," Keith reassured him, his eyes scanning the crowd. "I don't see 'em. Where are they?"

"Coat room, they'll be out in a few seconds... there they are..."

Harry didn't bother to look; his eyes were focused on a small door to the side of the hall. A big blonde man had just exited through the door.

“What’s through that far door?” he asked, nudging Draco.

“Washroom, I think,” Draco replied, his own eyes looking towards the coat room. “What are you – Harry, where are you –”

But Harry wasn’t listening to Draco. He began sidling through the thick crowd, his eyes fixed on the door, his hand moving towards the wand in his jacket.

Time to get some answers, Dudley. You owe me some explanations, and there won’t be any games this time. It’s time to use Nicci’s tactics – you’ll play my game now, Big D.

--

“Well, are you happy now, Garren?”

“About what?”

“You know ‘about what’! He’s going to try and get answers.”

“Note the word ‘try’. He won’t find them from his target.”

“But he’ll get something, and you know that! This is what you wanted, wasn’t it?”

“Croaker, we don’t have a choice here. He has to seize the role that we’ve set for him, if we want everything to proceed naturally. And this is one of the necessary steps. You know that there’s no other way.”

“None that we’ve found, anyway. Or none that we’ve cared to look for.”

“We have no choice, Croaker. No choice. He has to take this step.”

“A step in the wrong direction! What will you do if he goes too far? With his temper and his level of anxiety, that a good possibility.”

There was a long pause, and then, “Well, we’ll have to interfere.”

“You’re out of your mind, Garren. She will know! She’ll have us both!”

"There's no guarantee of that."

"There's a high probability, one that I don't care to risk my life on!"

"You're overestimating her power."

"Not in the slightest – you've seen what she can do! You're overestimating your luck. If she finds us, we're both worse than dead."

"And I've heard there's nothing worse than death."

"You know that's not the truth. And what about his soul, Garren? What about the parts of his soul that you're forfeiting in this gamble?"

"He chose this path, Croaker. We didn't."

There was a disgusted hiss. "We all but pointed and paved the way for him, Garren. You might be able to absolve yourselves of guilt from this..."

"I've had practice pushing people into the necessary shadows, Croaker. It hurts the first time, but you'll get used to it. Remember, you chose to help me in this endeavor."

"You manipulated me into it, and you know that, Garren! Do you think I would have helped you if you weren't dying of that plague or threatening my career with your insinuations?"

"Eventually, yes. I just secured the necessary time-table."

"Your soul will pay for this someday, Garren."

"As long as we prevent that coming oblivion, it's a price I'm willing to pay."

"And my soul? And his soul?"

"They're surcharges. You get your contributions back in the refund."

"Providing it ever comes, Garren. Make sure it does."

--

The bathroom was as well kept as the rest of the club, much to Harry's surprise. With glistening grey granite countertops, shiny steel cubicles, and a polished black floor, the entire room held an understated harsh elegance that Harry found appropriate. *Especially with what I'm planning to do...*

He spotted his cousin almost instantly. He was standing at the sink, washing his hands. Harry noticed the heavy rings on the fat fingers warily – he remembered how Dudley used to box competitively, and with rings, his punches could turn very nasty.

Harry moved towards the sinks slowly, his hand moving towards his wand. He had to move fast – if Dudley still had decent reflexes, he could be in very big trouble if he didn't take control of the situation forcibly. He began counting off the seconds in his head as he stepped closer

Three, two, one...

His reflection appeared in the mirror as he moved into his cousin's line of sight. The young man began to smile as he twisted towards Harry...

Only to meet Harry's wand inches from his face.

Dudley froze, and then did something unexpected, something that sent a chill down Harry's spine: he chuckled deeply. He eyed the wand and Harry with disdain.

"I'm presuming this is some kind of joke or prank that K-Crank is playing on me," Dudley remarked with a smirk as he picked up a paper towel and began to dry his hands idly, completely ignoring the cold expression on Harry's face. "As you well know, I'm not afraid of *pointed sticks*. Fresh fruit, maybe, but not –"

Harry shoved his surprise to the back of his mind – Dudley probably didn't recognize him or the fact that he was a wizard, it was the only possible explanation – and shifted his grip on his wand as he stepped

closer. "This isn't Monty Python, Dudley Dursley. This is serious, and I need answers from you."

Dudley's eyes narrowed. "I'm not in the policy of giving answers to people I do not know. So if you'd excuse me, I'd like to go enjoy the performance tonight –"

"You know *exactly* who I am, Dudley," Harry growled, trying to stop the sudden shaking in his hands. "You made my life a living hell for fourteen straight years until I saved your life."

"Really, sir, I don't know what you're talking about," Dudley replied irritably, tossing the paper towel on the countertop. "Now put that pointed stick away before you poke somebody's eye out."

"This 'pointed stick' can do a hell of a lot more than that," Harry said with a glare, stepping closer.

Dudley raised his hand and with a gentle push, he shifted Harry's wand slightly to the side. "I won't hesitate to call security –"

Harry's patience ran out. He didn't even bother to say the words of the spell. He only jerked his wand hard to the left. Dudley's mouth flew open as he was thrown through the air, landing with a dull thud against the side of the side. The steel bent slightly with the young man's weight, and Harry could hear the tiles of the floor crunch slightly with the impact.

He angled his wand at his cousin – who was looking up at Harry with a mingled expression of shock and horror – and took a deep breath, trying to steady his shaking hands. It didn't work.

"Dudley, I don't know *what* addled your brain, but you should know me better than you're letting on. It's Harry Potter, your cousin. The one you *tormented* for years. The one that *lived* with you for the summer and for the first ten years of your life. Dudley, if you can't remember me, I'd question your mental stability."

"I don't know any 'Harry Potter,' " Dudley replied, trying to pull together the remains of his suit and his dignity as he began to struggle to his feet. "I don't know what you're talking –"

“I’d remain quite still, if I were you,” Harry hissed. “You aren’t leaving until I say you’re leaving, and you don’t want to know what I can do with this wand.”

Dudley’s eyes went wide. “Wand? Are you implying that you’re some kind of crazy wizard or something?”

“Dudley, you *know* that!” Harry replied furiously with exasperation. “You know I’m a wizard – I wouldn’t use the word ‘crazy’, though.”

“I would,” Dudley muttered, leaning against the dented stall as he sidled into a more comfortable position against the stall. “You come and *attack* me with no provocation –”

“No provocation?” Harry asked incredulously, giving a hollow laugh. “You were playing mind games with me the entire time we were talking! You knew *exactly* who I was, and you had the *nerve* to taunt me with it! Consider this *payback*.”

A look of dawning comprehension – and horror – grew across Dudley’s face. “Ah, so it’s because of *that* you attacked me! I assure you, I didn’t mean any harm –”

“Why do I doubt that?” Harry muttered. “Since when have you *ever* ‘not meant any harm’, Dudley?”

“I meant the entire thing as a business proposal!”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Explain yourself.”

“Didn’t you take a look at what was beneath the business card?”

Harry’s hand went to his pocket where he had placed the card. He felt inside and pulled out a few, heavily creased bills. A pale flush spread across Dudley’s face as Harry examined them coolly.

“So you were giving me money... why?” Harry shoved the bills back in his pocket. “You’re not making sense, Big D?”

The flush in Dudley’s face was gone in an instant. “How did you know –?”

“Why were you giving me money, Dudley?”

Dudley closed his eyes, almost as if he was in great pain. “I needed the business.”

Of all the answers that Harry was expecting, that was the last one on his list – well, *nearly* the last one. “Why on earth would you want *my* business?”

“The shipping isn’t going well,” Dudley gasped quickly, his words coming fast. “The business is barely making ends meet legally. That’s why I’ve been trying to set up a meeting with K-Crank, so we can work something out. Apparently, my sources have told me that there’s a group who is offering a major shipping contract to Finland and Norway, but I can’t trace the contact details. “That’s why I wanted his help with this whole mess. K-Crank’s got one of the best information services in the country.”

“Not as good as he might think,” Harry muttered under his breath, recalling the look of shock that had crossed Keith’s face when he had heard that Crouch had arrived early. “So why me, Dudley? Why did you offer me money?”

Dudley flushed. “I figured you might have been the Norway or Finland contact. You got a meeting with K-Crank so quickly that I assumed you were the ones.”

Harry thought for a few seconds. *Something’s not adding up here. Why would Dudley automatically assume that – from what I saw a few minutes ago, Dudley should have been trying to negotiate with that Twin character, not K-Crank. Something’s not right here...*

“So, are you?” Dudley asked after a few tense seconds of silence.

“Huh?”

“Are you the Finland or Norway contact?”

Harry snorted. “Hardly. We aren’t finished here, Big D, so stay down!” Dudley eased back towards his sitting position, a disappointed expression on his large face. “That’s better. Now you say you don’t

recognize me. I personally find that hard to believe, but we'll come back to that. How did you get your own business with Piers going? Did Uncle Vernon give you money to start it up?"

"It was actually Piers' father who gave us the startup loan, although Dad did give me a good first contract... wait a minute, why did you call my Dad 'Uncle Vernon'?" Dudley's eyes narrowed with confusion. "He only has one sister, and Marge never had any children!"

"Thank God for that," Harry said, recalling the purple-faced beast of a woman that was his Aunt Marge. "I'm the son of your mother's sister. You know me, Dudley. Harry Potter."

Dudley scratched his jaw reflectively, almost ignoring the wand pointed down at him. Finally, he shook his head. "Sorry, I don't know any Potter by that name. You're going to have to —"

Without warning, Harry slashed his wand violently, and Dudley's head banged against the stall. The young man yelped with pain and clapped his hand to a rapidly swelling bruise on his temple, but Harry didn't care. His rage was rapidly consuming his reason, and the dislike that he had fostered for his cousin for years was only growing stronger every second. "Wrong answer – or rather, you thought about it too much. What do you know Dudley that you're not telling me?"

"It's just I didn't think that she had time to have a son with that man!" Dudley replied frantically, his eyes darting around the bathroom.

"There's plenty of clear evidence standing right in front of you," Harry replied caustically. "My mother had time to have a son before she died."

Dudley froze. "She's dead?"

Harry clenched his jaw to refrain from slashing his wand again. "You know she is, Dudley," he growled through gritted teeth. "She died about twenty-seven years ago, something you didn't mind reminding me of when you bullied me."

Dudley frowned with confusion. "That makes no sense."

“Oh really? I’ve seen her *grave*, cousin, I know she’s been dead! She’s my mother, after all!” Harry snarled, raising his wand again.

“Well, then you must not know your own mother too well, because *she’s not dead!*” Dudley retorted.

Harry was the one to freeze this time. “W-what did you say?” he asked, his voice quivering slightly. “H-how can she not be dead? She was killed.”

“Who would want to kill her?” Dudley asked, scratching his jaw again.

Harry’s hand was trembling worse than ever, and even his voice was shaking now. “Tell me you’re lying, Dudley. Tell me this is some really, really bad dream that I’m trapped in. Tell me you’re wrong.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say!” Dudley replied, his confusion mingled with anger now. “Your ‘mother’ is not dead, last time I checked – if she even *is* your mother. Personally, I just think you’re touched in the head.” Dudley began sliding to his feet, but Harry made no move to stop him. He couldn’t.

“Well, thanks for nearly ruining a good suit,” Dudley complained as he brushed dust of his jacket with his wide hands, scanning it closely for spots. Harry didn’t even respond. He could only stare down at his wand, held in his shaking hands.

Dudley shook his head disdainfully, almost with pity, as he opened the door. “The offer’s still good, you know. If you care to do business, look me up!” he called before he closed it, leaving Harry alone in the bathroom, alone with his pain.

He stood alone for a few seconds, looking down at his hands. And then the full reality of what he had done rushed into him like an icy current. Without hesitation, he tore open the stall door, bent over, and vomited up the remains of the excellent dinner he had enjoyed so much earlier.

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“Well, Garren, I really hope you got what you wanted. He lost his innocence and his security all in one evening. I hope you’re proud of what you’ve done.”

“That’s uncalled for, Croaker. Nor is it necessary.”

“He tortured his own cousin! I’m surprised he didn’t use the Cruciatus Curse to do it! You’re lucky that he just banged the poor man’s head into the wall a few times!”

“He won’t use Cruciatus – he knows what’s required to make it work. And besides, he’s used it before.”

“What, so you want him to use it again?”

“Stop it, Croaker! This is not something I want to do either, but we have no choice. Note the word ‘we’ here. You’re involved in this as much as I am.”

“Yet you neglect to remember that I explicitly said not to do this! What if the boy gets caught? What if his cousin reports him to the police?”

“He won’t. He can’t risk antagonizing a potential customer.”

“You’re just lucky it didn’t get uglier than it did there. And what about the information that the cousin provided?”

“Well, that was coming sooner or later. He has to realize the realities of this setting, and part of that are his parents.”

“They aren’t exactly who he thinks they are, in terms of personality and relationships... It’ll be a hard shock.”

“And it won’t be the worst one. The others are going to get it too... well, maybe not the one, but she’s got enough problems of her own to work with.”

“So which are you going to break next, then? The boy or the girl?”

“Revealing the ugly truth to the boy won’t be so bad. He’s already on the path to understanding it already, and if anything, his redemption will be clean.”

“And hers?”

There was a deep, albeit shaky sigh. “I’m not looking forward to that one.”

“Considering the amount of blood involved, I’m not surprised. The werewolf already suspects something is amiss.”

“Of course he does. The better part of him – the part we sent back – is already taking hold, and he knows it.”

“And what about the first one? He hasn’t even gotten involved yet – much to my relief.”
There was a pause, and then, “I think we should wait a little before we break the whole sordid truth to him about that one. It could prove messy.”

“You think?”

“There’s no need to be sarcastic, Croaker. By this revelation, he’s beginning to figure out the truth: that this isn’t the future he thinks it is. Sooner or later, he’s going to want the truth, and when he finds us, we’ll give it to him. And hopefully he will bring us the weapons we need to take her out once and for all.”

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“Brother, where’s Potter?” Nicci asked tersely as she slid back into her spot at the end of the booth. “I didn’t see him leave, and Ginny’s already looking anxious –”

“Bathroom,” Draco replied simply, picking up his glass just in time to join the toast that Keith was offering his fellow leaders. “He’ll be back, don’t worry.”

"It's not him I'm worrying – or caring – about," Nicci retorted, tossing back her hair as she continued to scan the crowd for any sign of Crouch. "If anything, it's Ginny and you I'm worrying about."

"I'm touched that you have so much concern for –"

"Forget I mentioned your name, you're doing fine. It's Ginny I'm more worried about. Potter keeps saying things that will get us into trouble if we're not careful, and *she's* going to get some of the fallout –"

"Say, Miss Nicci, where did that Potter boy go?" Keith asked suddenly, toying with his empty shot glass. Both Twin and DJ Martyr stiffened, and Nicci guessed that they had assumed the worst.

She shrugged. "Bathroom. He'll be back."

"I hope so, 'cause I really *do* want to hear his information – providing there is any, of course." Keith gave a toothy smile. "There really isn't any information, is there?"

Nicci clenched her fist as her eyes darted to the clock. *I'm running out of time if I want to get to Southwark and back!* "One could say there is information, but it is some that we all share."

Keith cocked an eyebrow. "So you know it too?"

Ginny smirked as she took a sip of her drink. "How else could she manage to cooperate with Harry so well?"

"Luck," Twin growled, taking a deep swig from his glass, "is always a possibility."

"Ah, Harry's not *that* lucky," Draco remarked smoothly. Nicci was inclined to agree with him.

"Any exchange of information should wait," DJ Martyr said sharply, his nervous eyes darting through the crowd. "Crouch is approaching the table – I'd best go and prep the sound system."

"I thought DJ River was doing that! What happened?" Keith said with surprise. DJ Martyr only responded with a snort as he got up from the

table, as if the option his fellow gangster had proposed shouldn't have even been considered. Ginny coughed slightly, the colour seeming to drain from her face. *What's with her?* Nicci thought.

"It's probably best he handles it," Twin said darkly. "Considering Crouch's temper, the last thing we need is something to go wrong."

"We've got more men here than he does, Twin, there's nothing to worry about," Keith replied easily, yet unable to keep the terse edge out of his voice.

"I know that, but –"

"Then let's *not* talk about it, so we don't attract suspicion," Keith finished, his eyes glittering in the dimming light as he peered through the crowd. "It looks like Crouch is talking to Ziani over there... good, he won't have time to talk to us before he has to give that speech..."

"Harry's still not back from the bathroom yet," Ginny whispered quickly to Draco. "Can you –"

"Not in the slightest," Draco replied flatly, taking another sip of his drink.

"But he –"

"He shouldn't need my help, Ginny. He's been doing this for a *very* long time." A sardonic grin crossed Draco's face as he took another sip and toasted Nicci, who ignored him completely – her eyes were following Ziani as he talked to Crouch. The two both looked very angry, and from their short, violent hand gestures, she could only guess what the subject of their conversation was.

Suddenly, an idea came to her. "K-Crank?" she asked, turning over to Keith. "Do your waiters still carry mikes?"

The gangster's eyes widened even as Twin's eyes narrowed. "How did you know about those?" he growled.

Nicci smiled sweetly. "I have my information sources."

In reality, she had *sold* the smuggled miniature microphones to K-Crank years earlier. *He probably doesn't remember it – given he doesn't even remember me.*

“Why are you even asking?” Twin pursued with a dangerous look in his eyes.

Nicci turned and jerked her head pointedly in the direction of Ziani and Crouch. Sparks of recognition flew to the gangster's eyes as he pulled a small radio out from inside his suit jacket.

“It's rude to eavesdrop on a conversation like this,” Draco tensely whispered.

“It's also rude to signal the waiter to remove all alcohol and potentially dangerous substances from drinks,” Nicci replied smoothly, taking a sip from her drink as her brother flushed, “but we do what we must.”

Keith shot Draco a shrewd look as Twin fiddled with the radio receptor. “You did that? How did you –”

“I tipped the waiter,” Draco replied stiffly. “Generously.”

Keith's eyes widened as a small grin spread across his face. “You were willing to do that? Most of the waiters here know better.”

“It was *very* generously,” Draco muttered, his flush deepening. Nicci and Ginny both exchanged smirks. *Did you honestly think we didn't see, Draco?* Nicci thought as she took another sip of her drink. *Ginny and Potter might not have picked up on it, but they certainly saw you move.*

Twin set the radio on the table, a chill expression of satisfaction on his face. “There. I've got it tuned to the waiter clearing that table next to 'em. This should be interesting...”

Almost instantly, Ziani's voice, cool but edged, came over the radio. Nicci cast a nervous glance around, but with the din in the room, nobody around would likely hear the radio transmission.

“...and here I thought you’d actually be honest enough with me to report on this.”

“Well, it wasn’t exactly *my* plan either – you know where *my* orders come from.” Crouch’s tone was icy, but Nicci could detect a faint, triumphant edge to them, as if he had won a victory that he had been hoping for a long time, and was trying not to gloat.

“You should have told me. I wouldn’t have come otherwise.”

“That’s a lie and you know it, Ziani. You would want to hear what I would have to say.” Crouch’s voice was almost smug.

“I wasn’t planning on you activating *them* tonight, though! I could hear what you have to say some other time! It doesn’t have to be here, especially given the possibility of collateral damage.”

“I don’t like the sound of ‘collateral damage,’ not one bit,” Keith remarked frostily, turning to Twin. “Where are Crouch’s bodyguards?”

“That’s strange, they’re...” Ginny’s eyes widened as she scanned the crowd. “I can’t see any of them...” She moved to stand, but Draco wrenched her back down.

“We can’t have you letting on that we know!” he hissed. “Crouch is staging an ambush for somebody here, and given our circumstances, it could be one of us! Don’t you think so, Nicci –” He turned to see that Nicci was already on her feet and whispering quickly in Keith’s ear. The expression on the gangster’s face as Nicci pulled away, and he turned to Twin and began talking under his breath very quickly.

“Nicci, what are you doing?” Ginny asked with confusion as the young woman was now frantically scribbling a note on a napkin and folding it up into a tiny square. “What are you planning...?”

“There’s no time for any of that now, Ginny, I need to go,” Nicci replied tersely, finishing the rest of her drink with one easy swig, shoving the folded napkin into Ginny’s hand. “I need to get to Southwark, and I don’t have time to tell Potter in person. Give him that note as soon as he hauls his miserable ass back to the table.

Draco, I need you to make an audio recording of the entire speech that Crouch gives tonight – I need to hear what he has to say.”

“But how am I supposed to –”

“Use your cell phone, you idiot! Make sure you have that recording, and make sure Potter gets that note.” And with that, Nicci vanished into the crowd, leaving a stunned Draco and Ginny behind.

Draco sighed and waved over the waiter. “I think I might need something potent,” he muttered to Ginny, but she wasn’t even listening. She was unfolding the note Nicci gave her, and reading the smudged ink with horror growing every second.

Potter,

Crouch is planning to ambush Keith and the other MKT leaders tonight – and likely you and the other two if you’re not careful. As soon as Draco gets Crouch’s speech recorded, get out of that club as soon as possible and meet me at Southwark Cathedral A.S.A.P. Don’t delay, and don’t hesitate to dispose of those in your way.

We were wrong from the start: this isn’t our future. We need to assume the worst – he might still be active in this age.

DON’T TRUST ANYONE.

Nicci

Chapter 11

To say that Nicci was furious would have been an understatement of the highest degree, and the one making such a statement would either be face-down and bleeding on the ground or running as fast as he could in the opposite direction.

She stormed blindly down the hall, her heels clicking on the floor with a hard, rhythmic cadence that resounded in the corridor. Her hair, tossed back away from her eyes, fluttered as she stormed towards the elevator. The bodyguards and few partygoers in the hall all eyed her guardedly, but they didn't dare move to stop her – her Uzi was in plain view, hanging beneath her jacket.

All the while, her thoughts churned with an icy fury, seething as she cursed her own stupidity. *How could I – how could we – have been so blind? The environment, the inaccuracies with our time, the unfamiliar terms, even the very air give it away! This isn't our world – it might have been at one point, but something changed. Something went badly wrong, and this is not the future we should have! I knew I didn't screw up when I killed Ziani – he's alive in this timeframe because for all I know, in this world, I never killed him! No wonder Keith doesn't know me – he might never have even met me in this world!*

It sent a chill down her back as she realized that she had no idea what she – as in herself in this world – was doing. She hadn't seen or heard anything... it was almost like she didn't exist. It disturbed her to the extreme.

But even more disturbing to her was the knowledge that *something* was the other members of her group was in just as much danger. *Potter's probably the worst – who knows where his parents are in this time-stream? From what Lupin said, there IS no Harry Potter – and that could well mean that Harry Potter doesn't even exist in this world! And what does that imply about everyone else?*

Ginny, on the other hand, exists... at least I know that, Nicci thought as she stepped into the darkened elevator and tugged on her gloves. *But as what? From what Lupin was doing to try and kill her, it can't be anything good... And as for Draco... I don't know the slightest thing*

about him! Nobody has even acknowledged him. It's no surprise that he's gotten along so well, considering that he hasn't been confronted with any actual threat towards him, except the fact that he's been disowned... and frankly, he was expecting that anyways!

The door of the elevator slid open with a whir of hydraulics, and Nicci strode straight through the stark lobby through the doors, ignoring the dark glares of the guards behind the desk. *I'll deal with them later*, she thought grimly, her hand gripping the cold grip of her submachine gun.

The limo was already waiting for her. Pulling open the door, she signaled the driver and climbed inside the vehicle. The limo immediately shifted into motion – the driver had been well-paid to follow her instructions to the letter.

Her eyes traced the darkened streets as the limo sped through the streets, her thoughts a tangled mass of confusion, bound together with dark fury and frustration. For once in her life, she had no idea what to do – indeed, what *could* she do? She had no idea how she had gotten to this baffling world, and given the few things she had seen, she assumed that it would be likely hostile. *Even if the Dark Lord is gone, there's still active gang war going on, and those Others that everyone keeps mentioning seem to be a potential threat. Given that Bellatrix Lestrange is alive – if we count that damned tapestry as valid – she could well be a member there...*

Suddenly, a disturbing thought occurred to her. According to the tapestry – which she was beginning to suspect was accurate – Bellatrix was alive. Sirius apparently was too – *hell, even Keith confirmed that, and he didn't appear to be lying about that* – and so was his brother. She had seen Lupin alive with her own eyes, along with Ziani. Hell, even *Crouch*, who if she remembered correctly, had lost his *soul* in her world, was alive and well – *and more dangerous than ever, given the way Twin, DJ Martyr, and Keith were reacting.*

All these people alive... in this world, Tonks could be alive too – although, given what I've seen from Lupin, she won't likely know me. A tiny thrill went through her stomach. And that could mean that Severus is alive too... and he'd know me. Hell, how could he not

know his own sister? Besides, if I'm anything at all like I was my world, he might have kept in touch with me! I could get a chance to see Severus, and even if he doesn't understand everything, at least I could get a chance to explain...

The limo took a hard turn and slid to a stop. Nicci opened the door herself and slid out, handing the grinning limo driver a handful of bills as she stepped onto the pavement. She was standing in a rather decrepit section of London, but she had no choice – this was where her supplies were waiting.

Drawing her Uzi and casting a sweetly deadly smile at the wolf-whistling drunks across the street, she sidled into the alley. Thankfully, there were no overflowing skips sitting in this alley, and she quickly crossed over to a tiny abandoned parking lot.

In the single occupied space was an unremarkable black Pontiac, gleaming from a fresh coat of paint and a good waxing. A weedy-looking man was leaning against the vehicle, smirking under his frayed cap.

"You be Nicci?" the man asked, his accent heavy as he approached. "The missus with the big money?"

"The big credit cards, nothing more," Nicci replied coolly, "and you know that's where the charge is going to be on. I'm good on my payments, though, and my credit is good."

"Your credit is *unknown*, lassie," the man hissed, stepping away from the car and tossing her keys. His arms were sinewy, but Nicci knew better than to test their strength – or that of the scuffed knife shoved in his worn jean pockets on his overalls. "I better be gettin' my money, or ye'll be taking heat."

Nicci snagged the keys out of the air with one gloved hand and spun them around her fingers. "As I said," she continued evenly, "my credit is *good*. You will get your money. I know better than to make more enemies than I have to in this clime."

The man stepped closer, and Nicci could smell the fish-and-chips and ale on his fetid breath. His eyes were glittering like coins in the

sputtering yellow light hanging from beneath a shattered window. She resisted the urge to step back several steps.

Suddenly, the man's hand darted downwards towards her short skirt. Nicci could feel his hand snaking through the lace –

In a single motion, she pulled her knife from her skirt and flicked the blade up beneath the man's long chin. He abruptly froze as the blade touched the pallid flesh near his bobbing Adam's apple.

But the man only split into a grin. "Come now, dearie, I'm only having a bit of fun... besides, it's not as if you aren't inviting it..."

Nicci could hear Draco's snide voice in her head: *if you're trying to be noticed on the other hand...* She shoved her knife closer to the man's throat, nicking the skin and drawing a trickle of blood onto the thin blade. The man stepped back, glaring balefully at her.

"It's not your business how I might choose to dress," she hissed icily.

"Oh, so you're an *expensive* whore now? You trying to be exclusive –

The man could not get out another word for the blood streaming from his nose. He fell to his knees, only to catch Nicci's boot in his ribs. Nicci, for her part, acted as if nothing had happened as she stepped around the man writhing on the ground, casually wiping the blood off the muzzle of her submachine gun as she slid into her car.

She gunned the gas and shifted hard, hearing the squeal of wet tires on pavement as she shot out of the parking lot, crushing the legs of the unfortunate man behind her with a sickening crunch. She sighed with resignation as she pulled onto the street. *At least it's starting to rain again – it'll get the blood off the tires before I hear awkward questions...*

She slid to a stop at the light and tiredly rested her head against her gloved hand. What was *happening* to her? She thought she had put the life of the dealer agent behind her – yet in the world she had found herself in, she had descended right back into her old way of life.

Worse, she had succeeded in dragging Potter, Draco, and Ginny in with her.

She could see Severus' accusing glare already, his disappointed scowl at her actions, the disgusted shake of his head as he turned to walk away from her again...

Stop this, she reminded herself grimly. *Severus is dead, and besides, I haven't descended that far yet. What I've done has a purpose – to keep those three young fools alive until we can get back to our world. And besides, nobody's dead yet...*

But she knew even as she turned the corner and drove towards Southwark Cathedral, it was only a matter of time.

--

Draco leaned away from Ginny and Nicci's note, his eyes intent on his glass of liquor. Without speaking, he picked up the glass and drank it down with a single toss.

"What was *that* all about?" Ginny asked irately.

"Have to check to see if I'm dreaming... nope, there's no alcohol magically filling the glass, so I'm most definitely sober and awake." Draco let out a sigh. "So we're in a different world – whatever the hell that means."

"She said she'd explain everything when she gets back," Keith replied evenly, his eyes not meeting Draco's. He was instead scanning the stage, watching as DJ Martyr worked to configure the sound system. "And she most certainly has some explaining to do."

"If anything, it makes sense," Draco mumbled.

"What?"

"I said it makes sense!" Draco snapped, keeping his voice low, watching Keith tensely. The gangster looked to have bigger things on his mind (*Crouch, I bet*, Draco thought darkly), but Draco didn't want to take any chances. "The discrepancies, the people who are alive

and should be dead, the lack of recognition from *anybody* who should know us... they all correlate to this not being our world."

"But *how?*" Ginny asked urgently, knowing that she didn't have much time before the performance started – the lights were already starting to dim. "Did the Orb-thing do this to us?"

Draco shrugged and rapped on the table for another drink. "Damned if I know. Frankly, it hasn't affected *me* much."

"Typical conceited Malfoy," Ginny spat, turning away with disgust.

"I resent that remark, because I am anything *but* typical. Besides, this isn't my party – the Orb sent me along for the ride with you three. To be completely honest, I couldn't really tell the difference much between this world and the last." Draco looked at Ginny pointedly. "That should tell us something too."

The red-head refused to make eye-contact. "And that is?"

"There are similarities between our world and this one," Draco said evenly, resting his hands on the table. "They may be different, but they aren't *that* different."

"And how is that even relevant?"

Draco moved closer, and whispered, "Because they might have been the *same* world at some point. The key, I think, to getting back *home* is finding that breaking point. But then again," he added, resuming a normal tone of voice, "I really couldn't care less if we get home or not. I'm enjoying myself here."

Ginny snorted with disgust. "Of course you are – you don't care enough for anyone that it would *matter* if you left our world..."

Draco's eyes widened with shock and anger. *That's out of line. That's not fair. How dare she...* He was about to retort, but the lights had dimmed completely, leaving the club in semi-darkness. The spotlights had clicked on, all casting their beams on a single black podium standing on the stage. DJ Martyr was standing there, his arms crossed over his chest as he surveyed the audience. He didn't look

like the type given to making speeches, and his expression was remarkably hostile and angry.

Draco let his customary smirk move onto his face. *This ought to be good.*

“Ladies and gentlemen, organizers and guests, and esteemed colleagues in the MKT Syndicate, it is my pleasure to announce our... unexpected... speaker for this evening. Coming from travels overseas for this evening, it gives me great pleasure to introduce the leader of the Congressional Subcommittee for Governmental Affairs, Mr. Barty Crouch Jr.” DJ Martyr stepped back stiffly and gestured for Crouch, who appeared from the darkened shadows that blanketed the corners of the stage to a polite round of applause. Draco’s eyes narrowed. *Why would a bunch of Muggles be applauding Crouch? Does he have some sort of influence in Muggle society too, that I’m not aware of? Or is there some sort of enchantment on this room?*

“Witches, wizards, citizens of Great Britain, and guests from abroad, I’d like to extend my thanks from the Parliament for coming this evening,” Crouch began, his smooth voice echoing in the silent hall. “It gives me great heart to know that so many are concerned about the issues that I am going to discuss tonight.”

Draco was flabbergasted and horrified at the same time, and a thin sheen of sweat began growing across his face as he punched the button on the cell phone to record the speech. Ginny shot him a curious look.

“What’s the problem now?”

“There are *Muggles* in the audience! By that statement, he just broke the Statute of Secrecy into smithereens!” Draco took a steadying breath. “He can’t *do* this! It makes no sense – Crouch wouldn’t jeopardize our world!”

“Look, I don’t know what you’re talking about, but something’s wrong with the sound quality on that damned microphone!” Keith snapped, his suave demeanor fading like mist in midmorning. “I *told* DJ Martyr to get it right...”

"The sound quality's fine, K-Crank," Twin replied coolly. "I heard him loud and clear. 'Ladies, gentlemen, citizens of Great Britain –'"

"Hang on, that's not what he said," Draco interrupted. "He addressed *our* crowd, not ladies and gentlemen in general."

"I *know* what I heard," Twin shot back irritably. "Now shut the fuck up, I need to hear this."

"He's just thanking the sponsors," Ginny replied with disgust, "most of which are affiliated with businesses that aren't the *slightest* bit legal..."

"I'm still not hearing it!" Keith growled, placing his palm on the table as if to rise.

"Well, you must be the only one, then, because the rest of us can hear it just fine!" Twin shot back, tugging his fellow gang leader back down.

"But how could..." Draco's voice trailed off as a startling thought occurred to him, one that made a fair bit of sense, when he thought about it. He turned to Twin. "Do you have one of our types in your organization working the sound system?"

"Yeah, DJ River. Why?" Twin asked suspiciously.

Draco overheard Ginny's sharp intake of breath, but he ignored it, his thoughts whirring with triumphant resolution. *It actually makes sense, when you think about it. This DJ must have cast a spell on the microphone to translate any words that Crouch says to magic-users to words Muggles can understand. As long as he doesn't drift off into archaic magical terminology, the spell should work. And with Keith... aha! He doesn't get the message either way – or rather, he gets it two ways, I should think – because he's a Squib. He's not entirely non-magical, but he still doesn't have powers. Thus, he's getting both messages, and can't make heads or tails of either of them.*

"Someone really has to fix that sound quality..." Keith muttered with disgust.

Suddenly, Ginny snatched up the tiny radio lying on the table and slid it to Keith. "Use this – maybe if it's filtered through a Muggle radio, you'll get the message!"

Keith eyed the radio hesitantly, but once he saw that Crouch was starting to move on with his speech, he hastily shoved the radio up by his ear. The worry left his face as he leaned back with a sigh. Draco breathed a little easier. *Well, at least he's under control.*

"The wizarding world has long existed with quiet sovereignty across this fair planet," Crouch said in a ringing voice. "One could almost say that this private community has outlasted all other civilizations and cultures throughout history. That is not to say we haven't had our differences, but there has been no active attempts to annihilate magic as we know it in our world – until recent years, that is."

Draco exchanged a glance with Ginny. *That* was new – neither of them had heard anything about this.

"Now, you might ask how this is possible. You might ask where our security failed, and how others discovered magic and developed a yearning to strip it from us. But I tell you here today, it was *not* any Muggle who discovered our private society and culture. No, not at all." Crouch clenched a fist for dramatic affect. "Our own brethren want to destroy us."

"Now you might ask how this is possible. It is quite simple, in essence, and it all returns to the issue of responsible government." Crouch unclenched his fist and for the first time, smiled. It wasn't really much of a smile – more of a baring of teeth – but it was a contented expression. Yet for some reason it made Draco's stomach churn.

"As a member of your Parliament, I can tell you that it has not been easy these past several years maintaining the government we created after the war," Crouch continued. "Even now, restructuring continues within the Parliament to ensure that all magic-users can feel safe in this troubled world. Part of the duties of a responsible government is to ensure that everyone feels safe in their environment."

Crouch gave a long-suffering sigh. “Unfortunately, as you well know, the war has never really ended. Despite major successes on our part, there are still pockets of anarchy and dissident elements who want to jeopardize our safety. These elements have been responsible for what has been deemed one of the most brutal ‘gang wars’ ever to sweep Britain. The rise of international organized crime has only bolstered this war, especially with the overseas connections that many of these gangs have.”

Twin exchanged a glance with Keith, and they both nodded. Twin turned away and began pressing buttons on a small electronic handheld under the table. Draco swallowed hard – this wasn’t likely going to be good.

“Some of these gangs – MKT, for one – are willing to work with the Parliament to help bring peace to our shores,” Crouch continued, giving a short bow of respect towards the booth. “Others, unfortunately, are not. Quelling these troublesome bodies will be a task for the future. Yet they are not the only ones who have brought trouble to our land, and you all know of whom I speak.” Crouch’s voice grew softer, yet bitterer with every second. “Most of you were here in London that fateful day three years ago when the bombs went off. *This* is the insurgent presence of which I speak, and of which I greatly desire to decimate utterly. They are cowardly scum, and they don’t hesitate to dispose of civilians when they get in their way. And they’re not just Muggles – they’re in our world too, plotting to jeopardize your safety and bring down responsible government.”

Crouch leaned forward, his eyes blazing with hate as he stretched out the word. “Terrorists.”

--

Nicci hammered on the brakes as she swiveled hard into the parking lot of Southwark Cathedral. She still had plenty of time, but she had rushed to get there just the same. *I need to get this over with, and quickly. If the werewolf’s willing to start early, all the better.*

The lot was deserted, and Nicci pulled into an empty space. Her hand rose towards the radio that had been left in the car by its previous

owner. But she paused, her fingers inches away from the dial, as she heard the grating voice of the vocalist sing the chorus...

"Ride like a cowboy towards the sun,
'Cause life ain't fun when yer on the run,
Got your gold and you got your gun,
Life as an outlaw just begun.
Got your shotgun by your side,
You got your horse and you got your pride,
Ride till there ain't no place to hide,
It's sad 'cause the bad guys always die..."

Despite herself, Nicci shivered at the words. She checked the tiny screen for the channel. Tiny block words spelt out *Shade 45*. Nicci frowned, not recognizing the station. *Must be new...*

She shut off the car and got out, fingering her Uzi lightly. *I don't know what tactics he's going to use, but if he gets nasty, I'll use my wand. Otherwise, I'll stick with something I'm familiar with.*

She strode easily around the side of the church, her heels clicking easily on the concrete. She kept her Uzi holstered – *best to appear nonviolent, at least* – but she kept her hand beneath it, ready to draw and shoot from the hip if necessary.

The sputtering streetlights cast precious little illumination on this side of the church, but Nicci could see clearly from the lights reflected off of the river. There was the ruined truck, charred and blackened from a fire that Severus had caused years ago. *But then again, did he really cause the fire in this timeline? Someone else could have...*

She walked around the truck to see a small section of pavement, covered with broken boulders and weeds and streaked heavily with black ash. Nicci was briefly surprised that it hadn't been cleaned out, but she guessed that since the truck hadn't been moved, the debris behind it wouldn't have been moved either. It made sense... somewhat.

Standing on that pavement was a single cloaked figure, his wand openly in his hand, his eyes glittering with a feral distrust that

unnerved Nicci. *He'll be sharper than I want – need to be prepared for that.*

“So,” Remus Lupin said slowly, stepping forward and raising his wand slightly. “You’ve come. Where’s the others?”

“Otherwise occupied,” Nicci replied coolly, pulling her Uzi out of her jacket and pointing it at Lupin, who stopped instantly at the sight of the weapon. “Don’t move.”

“Where are they? I have a right to know.”

“At a social event. MKT-sponsored. Frankly, I was surprised that *you* weren’t there, from what I managed to surmise from our brief conversation earlier.” Nicci tossed her hair back over her shoulders with a turn of her head and grinned slightly. “Although, from what K-Crank said, I can’t be *that* surprised.”

Lupin lowered his wand, looking disgusted. “I don’t work with MKT. My allegiance is with a different organization.”

Nicci snorted. “Sure, sure. I bet it’s not the Order of the Phoenix – seems too tame for you now. Does the name start with ‘Ash’ and end with ‘Born’?”

Lupin’s face contorted with fury. “Don’t you dare make judgments about things you can never understand! From your own testimony, you weren’t even here during the *Purgi*. You never saw the massacres. If you had, you’d understand what I do.”

“So you are an Ash-Born, then?” Nicci pursued, her eyes narrowing. *If he is, it’s over. You can’t trust – or negotiate with – terrorists.*

“No. My group is... well, connected with them, but we aren’t the same thing.”

Nicci rolled her eyes. “Explain that.”

Lupin scowled. “The group I’m in – the Renegade Phoenixes – is the last resistance element against the government. We’re affiliated with the Cyan League and MKT, but they aren’t part of our organization,

although some elements do overlap slightly. The Ash-Born, well... can we go inside, please?" He gestured towards a tiny shack in the small stand of trees. "I'd rather not talk about this in the open –"

Nicci laughed harshly. "Do you think I'm stupid or something? I'm not going *anywhere* with you. I'm not Potter, by Merlin! If you're going to tell me things – and you will tell me things, you'll say them to my face."

"Or to your back," a hoarse voice said from behind her. Nicci spun quickly to see a dark shadow emerge from the trees, wand drawn and ready. Lupin, for the first time that night, cracked a grim smile.

"It's about time you showed up, Cliff," he called to the black man crossing the pavement. "Did you activate the glyphs?"

"Right before coming," Cliff replied, raising his wand a little higher. Nicci, however, was already moving. *I need my back to something!* Quick as the wind, she darted to the ruined truck and set her back against the cold, charred metal and drew her wand. She pointed her wand at the new wizard – he was the unknown threat, and Nicci could deal the most damage with her wand.

She kept her Uzi firmly pointed at Lupin.

Lupin scratched her chin idly, the grim smile widening slightly. "Did I forget to tell you I brought backup?"

Nicci knew better than to bluff here – she had seen what Potter had done that evening, and she didn't want to over-extend her hand. "Must have slipped my mind. So who else, besides you and Mr. –"

"Clifford Thomas," the man replied coolly, eyeing her through thin-rimmed glasses. "Wizard, Renegade Phoenix, and Cyan League member."

"Werewolf?" Nicci asked, wondering how her situation could get any worse.

"Nah. We have Lupin and Fenrir Greyback running recon for that," the black man replied with a smirk.

Nicci's eyes widened. *Fenrir Greyback? A Death Eater? What is going on?* "You recruited *him*? He's a monster!"

"He was a monster," Lupin corrected her tersely, "until his family was massacred and he switched sides. He's a Renegade Phoenix now."

No, I was wrong – the situation HAS gotten worse, Nicci thought, her gaze darting back and forth between Lupin and Thomas. *Perfect. Even if I do run, there'll be two werewolves to track me down.*

"So I think, given the advantage, you should start answering a few questions for us, young lady," Thomas began, his tone even but deadly. "Why don't you come to the shack where we can talk?"

"Not in your life, and besides, you don't know what I can or can't do," Nicci retorted. "Even if your little glyphs go off, I've dealt with worse."

"It just enforces a Zone of Truth over this area," Lupin said conversationally, his wand still pointed at Nicci. "Cliff and I set it up earlier today. Anybody here must speak the truth – and that includes you. It's not as strong as Veritaserum, but it works."

Nicci hissed with a noise that sounded much like an angry cat. "Figures. Are we going to do an exchange of information then, the old-fashioned way, or are you two going to try and interrogate me until I crack? I can assure you, I won't."

Lupin and Thomas exchanged glances. "We don't torture people," Thomas replied coldly.

"If anything, the only person here that does that is *you*," Lupin added with a grimace. But there was something about Lupin's expression that seemed forced, and Nicci was intrigued. *What is that werewolf hiding?*

"So who do you know that *does* torture people?" Nicci asked, conversationally. "Is it your Cyan League, or is it your brand of Ash-Born terrorists?"

"The Ash-Born aren't terrorists!" Thomas began heatedly.

“They’re the nearest thing to them, Cliff, just calm down,” Lupin cut him off in a low voice. To Nicci, he said, “The Cyan League doesn’t torture. The Ash-Born will, but only their enemies. They are a group – I’d say a splinter group – of the Renegade Phoenixes, with some of our darker elements. They think that *anything* is worth the cost of bringing down IT, the Others, and the current Parliament. I, on the other hand, believe that some things remain over the line – like torture. What’s your excuse, Miss Nicci?”

“I do what works,” Nicci replied icily. “Nothing less – and sometimes a little bit more, just to make my point.”

Thomas and Lupin exchanged glances again, and there was a long silence. Finally, Thomas looked at her. “Would you be adverse to speaking plainly with me for a moment?”

“Isn’t that why I’m here?” Nicci replied caustically.

Thomas ignored the remark and asked, “Are you an American? And if so, how long did it take you to learn our accent?”

Nicci cocked an eyebrow. *They really ask the stupidest of questions.* “I’m British, like you.”

“I told you, Remus,” Thomas muttered.

“It was a hypothesis, and it rules out that Moody was involved!” Lupin replied tensely. “That can only be good.”

“Hardly, ‘cause it also rules out the simple answer,” Thomas shot back.

“What are you two talking about?” Nicci asked with exasperation. “I don’t have all night here!”

“You’re staying until you answer our questions,” Lupin growled to Nicci. Turning back to Thomas, he muttered, “Look, I know I was wrong, but that doesn’t mean we didn’t have to check –”

"I could have told you that it wasn't the case!" Thomas shot back, clearly irritated at Lupin's obstinate defensiveness. "I could have told you that she wasn't a Yank!"

"I could have told you that too," Nicci replied sardonically.

Lupin shot her a nasty look. "All right, then, Miss Nicci, where are you from?"

Nicci folded her arms over her chest, but subsequently readjusted her aim so that her wand was targeting Lupin and her Uzi Thomas. "Would you believe me if I told you, or would you think I'm crazy?"

Lupin rolled his eyes. "You're clever, but you're too rational to be truly crazy. Besides," he added, glancing at Thomas, "we've had enough experience with crazy people as it is, and I'm fairly certain you aren't one of them."

"I'm from the past in a parallel world."

Nicci deadpanned the words, and the effort she put into draining her voice of expression had been worth it. Both men looked totally blank.

"You're shitting me," Thomas said finally, rubbing the back of his head in confusion.

Nicci smirked. "You set up the wards – I'm not lying."

"The wards work...she's not lying, Cliff," Lupin whispered, his face already getting paler. "So that's why the spells kept sliding off of you – your Aural frequency is synchronized to the one in that world." He wiped away the thin sheet of sweat that had suddenly broke across his forehead, and Nicci could tell that it was an effort for him to keep his voice steady. "Are... are all of them like this? All of your companions?"

"Yes," Nicci replied simply. She restrained her smirk, but it was difficult as she watched Thomas and Lupin exchange aghast looks. *I can bet that wasn't what they were both expecting*, she thought smugly.

“Do you have *any* idea how much danger you are in?” Thomas asked urgently, his eyes rapidly scanning the trailer and the darkened trees, as if he was expecting to see some monster leap out and attack them all. “Do you have any idea what –”

“Cliff, don’t say anymore, you don’t know if you can trust her yet,” Lupin said sharply. “Presuming you aren’t insane, or somehow haven’t broken the wards... you could be a very dangerous person here, young lady.”

“I’m not a lady, despite what I’m wearing,” Nicci snapped, her hands tightening on the grips of her wand and submachine gun. “And I think *you* owe me some information too. From everything I’ve seen here, there are some serious discrepancies between this world and mine.”

“But how did you even *get* here?” Thomas asked, sheer curiosity overwhelming Lupin’s attempted answer to Nicci’s comment. “How did you cross the... the gap between... well, *worlds*?”

Nicci’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t even know myself, but that’s not the most important thing right now. I need information about this world.”

Lupin exchanged yet another glance with Thomas, who shrugged simply in response, as if to tell the werewolf that he was on his own. *Well, the man does have a point*, Nicci mused. *If Lupin hadn’t followed us, this wouldn’t have even been an issue.*

Finally, Lupin turned back to her and asked a single question, hesitation in every syllable.

“What... what year did you leave from in your, uh, world?”

“Ten years earlier, as of yesterday,” Nicci replied evenly.

“Rules out any Torrent anomalies,” Thomas muttered, almost to himself, but Nicci heard his words.

“I’ve heard about this *Torrent* thing, you know,” she said coolly. “We didn’t have it in our world, and I am curious about it. It seems a major facet of life here.”

“Only because it dropped us into the hellhole that we’re living in now,” Lupin muttered.

“Remus!”

“It’s the truth, and you can’t deny that, Cliff!” Lupin shot back, turning to glare at the black man. “You can’t honestly say that the Torrent has been *good* for us!”

“It wasn’t *only* the Torrent that ruined everything,” Thomas retorted, his voice loaded with cruel accusation. “It hasn’t been as if you have *helped*, Remus!”

The werewolf chose to ignore this comment, instead turning back to Nicci. “The Torrent,” he began, “is what we – as in magic-users – began calling a magical phenomenon that occurred nearly thirty years ago. We don’t know what it was, but suffice to say, on the night of September 16, 1979, every single witch and wizard had the same nightmare...”

“The waterfall,” Thomas whispered, almost to himself. Nicci felt goosebumps rise on her back at the haunted look on both faces. “A single, white-blue waterfall, streaking through black rocks...and falling forever...”

Lupin nodded grimly. “And we were falling with it.”

Nicci frowned, despite herself. “So what’s so special about a dream? It wasn’t as if anything changed in the morning.”

Lupin’s face shifted into a bitter, twisted smile. “Oh, but things *did* change, Nicci. The next morning, it wasn’t September 17, 1979.”

“It was September 17, 1989,” Thomas finished, his eyes flashing with the memory. “Somehow ten years flitted by, and none of us ever knew. Every single witch and wizard had the nightmare and awoke in this time, as if no time had flowed at all. Of course, for the Muggles around us, things were quite different.”

“Time *had* passed for them,” Lupin said, his tone as bitter as his expression. “Ten years gone for them, and anything without magic.

But for us... nothing.” He shook his head. “None of us ever understood what it was, but we all called it the Torrent.”

Nicci’s eyes had gone wide with astonished horror. *That makes sense, in a sick sort of way... It explains why Keith looks so much older, and that Dursley boy that Potter knows too... But for the rest, all the wizards and witches should look the same... or at least close. The same amount of time had passed...*

Suddenly, a thought occurred to her. *That time would have been before Potter’s birth, in the height of the first war...* “So how did the Dark Lord react to the Torrent?”

That statement caused an impact on the two men. Both exchanged horrified and panicked glances. Then, before Nicci could even respond, both of their wands were inches from her face, their faces filled with fearful fury.

“There’s a, a *Dark Lord* in your world?” Lupin asked, his voice shaking. “Is he active? What’s he doing? Did *he* send you back?”

Nicci, slightly alarmed at the reaction, raised her own wand a little higher. “Back off, will you? It’s not an issue, he’s dead. Potter got rid of him.”

She could see a muscle twitching in Lupin’s jaw as he struggled to contain himself. “And how did he do that?”

Nicci shrugged, trying to brush off the question as if it was meaningless. “Ask him for the details, but as far as I know, he destroyed the Dark Lord’s Horcruxes and then killed him with a rebounding curse —”

But Lupin was no longer listening. He had turned to Thomas and was already talking hurriedly. “We need to get this to our allies — Cliff, if the Ash-Born hear about this —”

“But the League —”

“Damn the League!” Lupin swore furiously. Nicci was impressed — she didn’t expect the werewolf had the guts to swear. “It’s useless

and broken as anything now, given what happened in Washington! We need to talk to the members who would make a difference – Gilderoy, Regulus, maybe even Peter if we can - and the last thing we need is for Padfoot and Prongs to get involved in this! If this girl knows a way to bring down the Dark Lord, then we need her with us!”

Nicci’s eyes narrowed. “Now look, I haven’t agreed to...” Her voice trailed off as her mind caught up to her mouth. “Did you say you need help to bring down the Dark Lord? You mean... he’s...”

Thomas exchanged a sharp glance with Lupin. “You tell her,” the black man growled.

Lupin took a steadying breath, his voice shaking with emotion. “Miss Nicci, you might have been lucky enough to have been able to destroy your Dark Lord, but I fear we weren’t as fortunate. He’s more alive than ever.” The werewolf paused, almost steeling himself for what he was going to say next, words that would nearly freeze Nicci’s heart.

“And with his Parliament, *he rules this country.*”

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“We all acknowledge that terrorism is a scourge in our nation that must be annihilated at its source, before we can lose any more citizens. The question is,” Crouch said, his voice glacial, “where that source is.”

He stretched out an arm. “Is it where they get their recruits? That can be anywhere. As long as there are extremist philosophies in our world, there will be young people foolish or desperate enough to join them.”

“Not *just* young people,” Draco grumbled.

Crouch lowered his arm. “Is it where they get their supplies, their weapons, or more importantly, their ideologies? Is it where the heads of these groups are, in the forged hellhole of the Middle East? We know very well that the gang IT –” Here Crouch was interrupted by a chorus of booing and furious shouts that quickly died down when the blond man raised his hand again. “We know very well that that

particular gang has terrorist connections, and I can only applaud your efforts to take them down. Even now, our government has troops in both Afghanistan and Iraq –” Another chorus of disgruntled booing erupted here, only to die down at Crouch’s furious glare. “We have troops there trying to root out the terrorist groups and their secret organizers.”

“Sounds like the international actions are not going well,” Draco muttered across the table.

“Public opinion is against it, for the most part,” Twin replied quietly. “And there were some issues with the intelligence on the Iraq situation to justify going in initially.”

Draco frowned, despite himself. *I need to get versed on current events – Nicci had better have gotten us some decent information from that Lupin.*

“But one must realize,” Crouch continued, “that the ideologies and recruits are not the true source of terrorism in our modern world. It is their financial backers that must be stopped, for without money, terrorism couldn’t function. Weapons are extremely expensive –”

“You can say that again,” Keith muttered to himself.

“- And plenty of money is often required to, ah, *grease the wheels* of the whole process. Unfortunately for us, some of this money often comes from sovereign nations that are beyond our control and power.” Crouch sounded sincerely regretful when he said this, as if he wanted nothing else than to go in and stop their financial support. “But sometimes the money comes from other sources – corporate sources.”

Crouch clenched his fist. “Now, no upstanding business would ever fund terrorists, and even most criminal organizations don’t deal with that scum, the worst of the worst in our country and world. But some, choosing to betray their countries and citizens, deal with these murderers. And I am pleased to announce to you the name of an organization that has funded terrorists. I am also pleased to inform you that the swift, efficient justice of the Parliament will descend upon

these traitors this very night. It will be the merciless demise that all terrorist collaborators deserve.”

There were general sounds of approval in the audience, and nearly everyone was looking at Crouch, rapt and enthralled by the possibility of a target to paint on a formerly-faceless enemy.

Draco was watching too, but the expression on his face was much more guarded. He had noticed the wary glances exchanged between Keith and Twin, and he had a feeling that something very wrong was going to happen. *They wouldn't dare target Crouch now... not a great time for an assassination...*

“Look!” Ginny said suddenly, pointing to the side of the room. “There’s Harry!”

“About time,” Draco said with relief, turning to see Harry standing against the far wall. *Dear Merlin, he looks terrible*, he thought with some surprise, as he noticed Harry’s pallor and pained expression. *I wonder what’s wrong with him...*

“And the name of the organization – well-known to all of you is...” Crouch, for the first time, drew his wand and flicked it towards the ceiling. Behind him, seemingly out of nowhere, dozens of cloaked and hooded figures appeared, all wearing some sort of heavy leather attachment on each arm. Each attachment had four slots along the wrist section.

And in each slot was a wand.

Crouch, for one of the first times that night, smiled widely. “MKT.”

Keith bolted to his feet. “That’s a lie! We’d never fund terrorists!” he roared, his voice echoing over the hall, but nobody seemed to listen.

Crouch only grinned wider, and Draco thought he could see the sadistic glint in his eyes from here. The blond man leveled his wand at the booth where Keith and Twin – and Draco and Ginny – were sitting. “Rosier, kill them all – justice is served.”

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Nicci, for one of the first times in her life, was at a loss for words as her thoughts scattered. She had never expected this – the Dark Lord, still alive? Still alive and *ruling England*? It seemed impossible. After all Potter had done, it was all for naught – the Dark Lord was alive, and from the impression she got from Lupin and Thomas, more powerful than ever.

Her eyes narrowed. “Wait a minute – *Parliament*? Since when does the Dark Lord want to run a legitimate government? Whatever happened to the Ministry –?”

“Gone thirteen years ago,” Lupin replied, turning away from Nicci’s appalled face. “The Dark Lord thought he needed a more reliable and efficient way to run a government, so he created the Parliament and executed the *Purgus Ministeria*. You can only guess what that is.”

Nicci’s face hardened. “So there was a horrendous amount of killing, then? You couldn’t stop him?”

Lupin glared at her. “I’d like to have seen you try. Besides, when our side was divided and leaderless, and with the Circle broken, we didn’t have a chance. If it weren’t for what Padfoot and Prongs did –”

“Now, I thought I just heard somebody speak my name,” a voice remarked lightly, almost conversationally. Nicci froze – she hadn’t heard anyone coming, but out of the darkness, two men were approaching. Both handsome and dressed in brand-new, stylishly cut robes (a stark contrast to Lupin’s frayed tatters), they projected an aura of easy confidence that Nicci strangely found comforting, unnerving, and untrustworthy. They looked about the same age (early-to-mid thirties, although Nicci knew she was no good judge with ages), and both had jet-black hair. The speaker’s hair, though, stuck up all over the place, while the other’s man’s hair fell across his face with a casual elegance that made him seem even younger and more good-looking.

Both Lupin and Thomas spun towards the new arrivals, turning their wands away from Nicci. *About time*, she thought.

“What are you two doing here?” Lupin spat hoarsely, admirably containing his own surprise. “How did you find us? And where’s Fenrir?”

“Unconscious in the trees,” the first speaker said mildly. “I’m afraid Padfoot hit him a bit harder than he should have. As for finding you two, well, the credit goes to Padfoot there as well. He placed the wire in your office cabinets, Cliff, and he overheard the entire conversation you had this afternoon. Now, might I be so kind to inquire of the identity of the beautiful young lady you are so *harshly* interrogating?”

“I think I can decline to acquiesce to that request,” Nicci replied sharply. “It means ‘no way in hell’, if you need a translation.”

Both men exchanged glances and chuckled deeply. Lupin and Cliff both tensed, prepared for any movement or shift in the conversation. “Padfoot, she’s after your own stripe here! Looks like your *perfect* type,” the speaker remarked with deep amusement.

“I think, Prongs,” the other man said with a dashing smile, “that you might be right. And a lady garbed in such appropriate attire... well, I can’t just *not* introduce myself! My dear, I am Sirius Black, my friend is James Potter, and you are... what was your name again?”

“Your worst nightmare,” Nicci growled, giving the man a glare of deepest loathing. *I can immediately see why my brother hated this man in our world. And the Potter looks just as bad. I’ve seen enough of their type before, and my first impressions were seldom wrong.* “Now back off and get lost. You weren’t invited to this meeting.”

“Damn right,” Lupin hissed.

“Unfortunately, Moony, *you* aren’t in any position to make statements like that,” James Potter said coolly. “I have a warrant for your arrest from the Cyan League, for treason.” Out of the darkness, four more cloaked figures emerged, all with wands pointing at Nicci, Thomas, and Lupin. Lupin abruptly stiffened and shook with mingled fear and rage as he saw the silver tips on the end of each wand, and Nicci swallowed hard – these men meant business.

“So I’m afraid you’re going to have to come with us,” Sirius Black said with a smirk, “and we’ll become acquainted with each other whether you like it or not.”

Chapter 12

"Garren, we need to talk."

"What's the problem now? For once, everything is going right."

"I'm going to ignore that statement as your deluded perceptions to inform you that although our subjects are surviving in that world, we've forgotten the other one."

There was a stunned pause, and then, "You're lying. You have to be. We can't handle that now! She'll see it!"

"And since when did you ever care?"

"I've always cared, thank you very much, Croaker. I've just been willing to risk it. But not for this... not with the others. Are more souls moving across the breach?"

"Nope."

"Then what's the problem, then?"

"His friends – you know, the ones that went with him to the Department of Mysteries. They've awoken, and time flits by at a different rate in that world than in this one, especially when there's an oulenkeyne involved. But now everything's restored, and the three are already acting."

"So what do you think they'll do?"

There was a bitter chuckle. "You tell me, Garren! After all, aren't you the one who can see the future?"

"Not at will, and you know that."

"Forget about seeing the future, you can't even see the present! You haven't even considered the consequences of your actions! Look, now that those four are gone, things are going to start to come out, and you know very well what that means."

There was another long pause, and then, “They’re going to start looking, aren’t they?”

“Fortunately for us, they don’t know where to start, but they do have some qualified magical talent. And our first traveler took the time to leave enough hints behind...”

“All right, all right, I get the picture!”

“Unfortunately for us, they’ll be the ones to get the real picture – you know, the one that’s actually pertinent to this catastrophe.”

“Croaker, you know more than anyone that we can’t interfere here. We can only straddle the gap between worlds so much.”

“Fine, we’ll do it your way then. But if Kingsley Shacklebolt ever comes through here desiring an explanation, you’re taking the heat this time.”

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Minister of Magic Kingsley Shacklebolt was having a very bad day.

Not just any ordinary bad day – one of the truly remarkably abysmal days that occasionally happened to anybody who operated in a government office for too long. Not that Kingsley was used to doing office work – he infinitely preferred to be out in the field or on an investigation on his own time. But nobody else had the skills (or the nerve) to take the Minister of Magic position, and frankly, there weren’t many qualified candidates anyway.

Since then, his life had been a living hell.

He had been working longer hours than any other Auror on staff, but the sheer amount of paperwork that he had to handle made his workdays stretch long into the night. In a perpetual state of exhaustion in stress, every day felt miserable. He felt like he was making no headway in the paperwork, which covered every topic from ratifying wizarding wills (the stack was growing close to six feet by now), negotiating for loans from the understaffed goblins at Gringotts for repairs at Hogwarts, and writing condolence letters to

dozens of bereaved families. That was coupled with the dozens of requests for personal assistance from harassed Ministry of Magic employees, who thought that only the Minister could fix their problems.

Suffice to say, in combination with the enormous amount of paperwork the Minister of Magic usually had to process and the amount of files that had to be recovered after the Death Eaters were evicted from the Ministry, he had had a very miserable week.

He didn't even have a qualified undersecretary to handle some of the load – there was no way in hell he was going to trust Dolores Umbridge to do *anything* – and the newest recruits were barely holding up as it was.

It was nearly six, and Kingsley was still signing papers regarding wizarding financial reports, when his door flew open with a tremendous bang.

Instinctively, he dropped out of his chair and rolled to the side, drawing his wand as he moved... only to confront a pair of irate teenagers, both with their wands out and staring at the Minister.

Kingsley hastily stowed his wand away. *Need to recover quickly...* “So sorry about that, just Auror reflexes. It's good to see you, Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger –”

“We don't have time for this,” Hermione Granger interrupted harshly, not lowering her wand for a second. “Where's the Head of the Department of Mysteries?”

Of all the questions that Kingsley had expected, *that* had not been one of them. “We currently don't have a head of that Department –”

Ron Weasley swore violently, while Hermione just looked furious. “Well, *somebody* has to be accountable for what goes on in that place, and he's going to give us some answers!”

“Hermione, what are you talking about?” Kingsley asked irritably, settling back down behind the heavy monstrosity that was his desk. “How is this –”

“Harry’s gone.”

Kingsley bolted to his feet. “What do you mean, ‘gone’?”

“Just what I said, Minister. Harry’s gone. Vanished into thin air, along with Ginny, Draco Malfoy, and that Snape girl.”

“So *that’s* why she didn’t show up for our meeting at five thirty-five!” Kingsley muttered, trying to stifle the rising panic in his system. He yanked a fresh piece of paper out from a stack and began scribbling. “When did this happen? Where? How?”

“About a half-hour ago, in that rotating chamber in the Department of Mysteries. As for how they left... well, what do you know about the Orbs of Dreams?”

Kingsley frowned. “Never heard of ‘em. What’s the problem?”

“Well, one of them was just hovering in the middle of the chamber. Ginny touched it by accident, and then, well, things sort of went crazy then,” Ron replied, his brow furrowed as he tried to recall the memories. “Then Hermione hit it with some sort of spell –”

“The Reductor Curse,” Hermione whispered. “I was trying to knock it out of... well, whatever it was doing.”

“Why were you all going down to the Department of Mysteries anyways?” Kingsley asked, looking up and giving them both penetrating looks. “It’s still work hours!”

“Harry suspected that Rookwood’s hiding there, and we ran into Narcissa and Draco Malfoy and the Snape girl on the way. They were coming to see you, as a matter of fact. Something about accounts being frozen at Gringotts...”

Kingsley put his face in his hands. *Great. Some overzealous Auror decided to take matters into his own hands and freeze the Malfoy vaults. I’d fire the stupid idiot, but we have too few reliable Aurors right now as it is!*

He looked up. "So did you find Rookwood? Is he in the Department of Mysteries?"

Hermione exchanged a glance with Ron. "We didn't look any farther," she replied uneasily. "We figured... well, after the Orb, we weren't sure we were the best qualified to handle the situation."

"Hasn't stopped you in the past," Kingsley remarked sardonically.

"Ha ha, very funny," Ron growled. "So we chose to do what *responsible adults* would do – inform the parents of the vanished and then come talk to you so we can blame a superior."

"As if I don't have enough work on my plate already..." Kingsley muttered, his mind blazing, his shock at Harry's vanishing long shoved behind the curtain of cool professionalism. *Who knows where the hell that Orb might have taken him and the others... the strange thing is that the Orb didn't take Ron and Hermione too...*

He paused, and looked up. "Did you say you informed the *parents* of the vanished?"

Ron sent Hermione an accusing look. "I told you it was a bad idea!" "It only made sense, and in any case Narcissa Malfoy went down to the Department with us. She has undoubtedly informed Lucius Malfoy about everything by now..." Hermione's voice trailed off at the look of very real panic on the Auror Minister for Magic's face. "Did I do something wrong?"

Kingsley stood up, drawing his wand in one sinuous motion. With a shaking hand, he caused the doors to slam shut and lock. "That'll hold 'em for a few more seconds... give me time to think..."

Ron and Hermione exchanged curious glances at Kingsley's strange behavior. Of course, neither of them would have suspected his reasoning.

He knew Molly Weasley's temper very well. The news had probably not gone over well with her at all. "I can only assume you told the Weasleys in *person*?"

“Hermione sent a Patronus, why?” Ron asked suspiciously. Then, less than a second later, he understood, and his face went white. “We’re in trouble.”

“I can’t see how things could get much worse –” Hermione began heatedly.

BANG.

The doors into Kingsley’s office exploded open with a resounding boom that sent both Ron and Hermione darting for cover. There, standing on the threshold of the door, was a red-faced livid Molly Weasley.

Kingsley knew in that second that if Voldemort had offered the Auror a duel to the death, he would have taken it hands-down.

“Where,” Mrs. Weasley began slowly, every syllable of her voice quivering ominously, “is Ginny?”

Ron put on an unconvincing expression of innocence. “Well, Mum, you see...”

“I WAS ASKING KINGSLEY SHACKLEBOLT, NOT YOU, RONALD!”

Ron wisely shut up. Kingsley, for his part, tried to contain his bizarre urge to laugh out loud at Mrs. Weasley’s almost comically red face as he closed the doors with a wave of his wand.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Weasley almost immediately turned her attention back to Kingsley. “WELL?”

“Molly, if you got Ron’s message, you know better than anybody what’s going on,” he began in a consoling voice. “Ginny and Harry have been taken with two others by a magic that nobody understands to a place that nobody knows.”

“AND HERE I THOUGHT WE ACTUALLY HAD SECURITY FOR THESE THINGS INSIDE THE MINISTRY!”

“Molly, calm yourself!” Kingsley said sternly. “I’m as worried for them as you are, but there’s nothing that can be done by raging and screaming and subsequently trying to break all my glassware –”

“I’ll be breaking a lot more than glassware if you don’t start giving me answers, Kingsley Shacklebolt!” Mrs. Weasley snapped scathingly, some of the heat leaving her face. “Why on earth was Ginny and Harry here anyways?”

“They felt that they needed to investigate Rookwood’s disappearance, so they decided to check the Department of Mysteries,” Kingsley replied evenly. “They met up with Narcissa and Draco Malfoy and Nicci Snape on the way, and they all went down to the Department. They had an encounter with an Orb of Dreams and for some bizarre reason, Harry, Draco, Ginny, and Nicci vanished into thin air...”

“That Snape girl vanished too?” Molly asked sharply, pouncing on the information.

“As far as we know...”

“I KNEW THAT GIRL WAS NO GOOD! WHAT DID I TELL YOU, RONALD, ABOUT ASSOCIATING WITH HER?”

Ron went scarlet. “Mum, as you can notice, I’m still here! Besides, Hermione and I never liked her much anyways... Harry was more accepting of Nicci than anyone...”

“That boy needs to learn about associating with bad folk like her!” Mrs. Weasley snapped, her eyes glittering with anger. “So what do you plan to do about this, Kingsley?”

“Well I –”

BOOM.

“It appears,” Lucius Malfoy growled, his icy eyes blazing with fury as he stormed into the office with his wife, “that I’ve been preceded. I hope then, Shacklebolt, you can start giving me answers. Where are my children – *both of them?*”

Kingsley gave a frustrated sigh until he looked up at the former Death Eater. Kingsley had never been remotely afraid of any of the Malfoys, but at that second, with pure rage burning in the patriarch's eyes and a newly crafted wand already in his hand, Kingsley felt a twinge of unease fill his gut. He quickly calculated his odds. *Five on one, providing Hermione and Ron fight. Not good.*

"I don't know –"

"That's *not* a good answer," Lucius hissed, stepping even closer. "What do we need *to* know?"

"Probably an Unspeakable –"

"Good. Then get one up here *now*."

Hermione sighed. "It's what I wanted all along..."

Kingsley had a lot of patience, but he was reaching his limit. "I can't, and *you* know why better than I do, Malfoy!"

Ron frowned. "Why can't you get a member of the Department of Mysteries up here? I don't get it."

Kingsley tossed up his hands in exasperation. "Probably because when Voldemort – oh stop it, you four," he snapped as Lucius, Narcissa, Ron, and Mrs. Weasley all winced. "Because when he took over the Ministry, one of the first things he did was to go into the Department of Mysteries to look for that thrice-damned prophecy. He said that the Unspeakables had to produce a record of the Prophecy or they would be forcibly replaced. Suffice to say," Kingsley finished with a grimace, "nearly all of them were replaced to a man."

"He killed all of them?" Hermione asked with a faint note of disgust in her voice.

"Not all of them," Lucius said quietly. When the rest of the people in the room turned to look at him, he shrugged. "I wasn't on the massacre – it's hard to kill when you don't have a wand – but I heard the reports. From what I heard, one managed to get away with an

accomplice, and they set fire to a few record books before they left. The strangest thing is that they seemed to vanish into thin air..."

"Almost like how Draco and the others vanished," Narcissa finished in a whisper. She turned to her husband. "Did Abraxus ever put in any of his journals where he stashed the Orb of Dreams *he* had?"

Lucius snorted. "My father was a terrible record-keeper, and his handwriting was even worse. I sincerely doubt it. After all, he died only a few weeks after coming back without that damned thing."

Hermione, who had been following the exchange intently, turned back to Kingsley. "So you have *nobody* who would be able to explain an Orb of Dreams properly to us?"

Kingsley sighed. "If I did, I would have sent him or her to me immediately. Unfortunately, given the massacre and the fact that most things in the Department of Mysteries are conceptually and theoretically based, it would take an uncommonly brilliant wizard theoretician to understand a phenomenon like those Orbs. I doubt any are even still alive today..."

Ron's eyes suddenly lit up. "I got an idea! Kingsley, can you get us to Hogwarts?"

"Ronald, the school is closed for repairs, you can't just ask the Minister of Magic to let you in," Mrs. Weasley scolded. "Besides, what could you want there?"

"Professor Dumbledore," Hermione answered for him, a light rising in her eyes as well as she caught on to the idea. "He was one of the most renowned magical theoreticians in the world! Surely he knows something!"

"Miss Granger, surely you know that Dumbledore is indeed *dead*," Lucius drawled caustically, yet with uncommon politeness. "He can't be of help to you."

"His portrait can though," Hermione retorted, as she pulled a book off of Kingsley's desk. "Minister, can you give me permission to turn this into a Portkey? I don't know how much time we might have."

“Until what?”

“Until it all ends,” Narcissa whispered. Lucius turned to look at her, not believing the words he had heard leave his wife’s lips.

“What are you talking about, Narcissa?”

“Those were the words that came out of the parchment of Severus’ will,” she murmured. “He must know something...”

The silence in the room was deafening. Finally, Mrs. Weasley turned to Kingsley, an expression of mingled frustration and fear on her face. “Well? Are you going to give Hermione sanction to make the Portkey or not?”

“She has my sanction, but you can’t leave just yet,” Kingsley said tersely, his eyes on the Malfoys, “unless...”

“We’ll come with you if you go to Hogwarts, Shacklebolt,” Lucius said, a decisive edge coming back into his voice. “We need answers as much as anyone, and if Miss Granger can get them from Dumbledore’s portrait, well, so much the better.”

“That’s just it, *I’m* not going,” Kingsley said, his eyes noting the surprise on the Weasleys’ and Hermione’s faces. Already seeing the objections, he raised a hand cautiously. “I know this sounds bad, and of course I care about Harry and Ginny as much as anybody, it’s just that I need to continue my work here. I can do more good in terms of research and coordination from my office than anywhere else.”

“And I can only assume you will summon a squad of Aurors to search the Department of Mysteries, from top to bottom?” Lucius asked, his eyes smoldering with repressed anger, hidden behind his professional façade.

Kingsley nodded grimly. “You can count on it.”

--

The office was as wondrous and beautiful as ever, but Hermione had no time to remark on the pretty scene. Her thoughts were only on

Harry and Ginny, and the desperate sensation that was slowly filling up her gut with fear. *There's more to this, I know it...*

Ron nudged her. "So how do you want to do this?" he asked quietly, gesturing at the portrait of the sleeping Albus Dumbledore. "Can we even communicate with him?"

"Harry has, I think, before," Hermione replied uncertainly as she approached the painting. "Uh... Professor Dumbledore? Sir? Can you talk?"

She held her breath for a few seconds, but the sleeping headmaster did not respond. Frowning slightly, Ron stepped forward.

"Professor Dumbledore, please wake up, it's about Harry –"

The old man in the portrait grunted slightly in his sleep. Hermione held her breath again, but let it out with exasperation as the Headmaster drifted back to sleep.

"I told you this wasn't going to work," Lucius muttered to his wife.

"Let Hermione work, Mr. Malfoy, she knows what she's doing," Mrs. Weasley snapped, even as her concerned eyes watched as Hermione moved even closer to the painting.

"Professor Dumbledore, Harry needs your help! He's gone with Ginny and Draco and –"

"Gone?"

Hermione let out a cry of relief as she saw Dumbledore's eyes open slightly. He broke into a somewhat bemused smile as he surveyed his office.

"My my, it's a rather large group who have earned detention already this term."

"This is not something to joke about, Dumbledore," Lucius growled. Mrs. Weasley nodded her consent, her eyes fixed on Dumbledore.

But the Headmaster seemed not to notice the ominous looks on their faces, instead only smiling. "So how is Draco, Lucius?"

"Gone," Narcissa answered, trying to keep the panic out of her voice. "He vanished with Potter, the Weasley girl, and Nicci in the Department of Mysteries —"

Dumbledore frowned. "I'm sorry, who was the last?"

"Oh damn," Lucius swore under his breath, a dull flush creeping into his cheeks as he looked up at the perplexed former Headmaster. "Surely you remember Nicci Tara Snape, do you, Professor?"

Dumbledore frowned even more deeply. "I was unaware that Severus had a daughter."

Hermione restrained her urge to burst out laughing at the look of confusion on Lucius' face. Unfortunately, Ron let out a guffaw before being made silent by the glares from Narcissa and his mother.

Dumbledore, however, had noticed the laugh. "Is there something funny about that, Mr. Weasley?"

Ron wiped a tear of laughter from his face. "Nothing, Professor, except... well, Nicci's not Snape's daughter. She's his sister."

To Hermione's utter astonishment, a look of confusion crossed the former Headmaster's face, something that she had never seen before. *Dumbledore just looks weird when he's confused...*

"How," Dumbledore asked, "did that happen? Did Severus' father take up with another woman after Eileen Prince? And why didn't Severus ever tell me this?"

"Severus had plenty of secrets that he didn't tell anybody, and that included you," Lucius snapped in a rather clipped tone. "However, to answer your question, Snape's muggle father wasn't Nicci's father."

"And so who is?"

Lucius flushed and looked like he'd rather be anywhere else in the world but that office with an inquisitive portrait of Dumbledore. "I... am."

Dumbledore, for his part, frowned deeply. "If I remember correctly, Eileen was several years older than you and not of your tastes in the slightest. So how did..."

"It was a party!" Lucius snapped, his face going a deeper scarlet than it had ever gone before. "I was drunk and she threw herself at me. She could be... well, attractive and pleasing when she wanted to, and, well... we got a little carried away."

"That's one way to describe it," Narcissa remarked curtly, a flush rising in her own features as well. "The way I remember it, you two were naked in each other's arms in the library when I found you..."

"Narcissa!"

Ron was openly laughing now at Lucius' embarrassment, and even Dumbledore smiled slightly. Mrs. Weasley and Hermione, on the other hand, both had scandalized expression.

"Really, Mrs. Malfoy, you shouldn't have..."

"What? There are little bits in every family that people want kept secret," Narcissa remarked tossing her hair back primly. "But that's neither here nor there. What we want from you, Dumbledore, is information. You were one of the best magical theoreticians in the world, correct?"

Dumbledore looked slightly guarded as he answered Narcissa's question. "Yes. Why?"

"We have reason to believe that my children, Potter, and Miss Weasley were somehow taken from us by a magical artifact known as an Orb of Dreams," Lucius said evenly. "Have you heard about these devices? What do you know about them?"

Dumbledore froze, as if a sharp blow to the head had startled him. A worried expression soon replaced the stunned look. "Oh, dear."

“What? Where’s Harry and Ginny? What’s going to happen, Dumbledore?” Mrs. Weasley asked, on the verge of panic.

“I need Severus here right now,” Dumbledore said, his eyes glancing around his office. “Where is he?”

“He’s dead,” Hermione whispered. “Voldemort’s snake killed him.”

“I am aware, but where is his portrait?”

Hermione and Ron glanced at each other, flabbergasted. They had never suspected that Snape – *Snape*, of all people – would have a portrait in the Headmaster’s office. *But then again*, Hermione thought, *he was Headmaster of the school, if only for a year...*

“I was about to ask about that,” Lucius said, his voice filled with rising anger. “Snape was a headmaster of this school! Where is his portrait? Did the Ministry dare take it down? I’m going to *kill* Shacklebolt with my bare hands if he did this...”

“There’s no need to get angry, Lucius, it’s probably still at the painter’s residence,” Narcissa said quietly. “We can get past the wards and get it, if you wish.” She eyed Dumbledore’s painting somewhat anxiously, as if unnerved that a painting was now issuing orders.

“The Apparition wards are still down, as far as I know,” Dumbledore said quietly. “Voldemort was thorough in his attack... If you can get Severus’ painting here as soon as possible, that would be excellent. And I’d ask that Molly Weasley come with you – I need to speak to Ron and Hermione alone.”

The three adults looked shocked, but then Lucius grudgingly muttered, “Well, she *is* a pureblood, and that’ll get her through the wards...”

“Splendid,” Dumbledore said with a small smile – a smile that disappeared seconds after Lucius, Narcissa, and Mrs. Weasley Disapparated. Hermione now felt distinctly uncomfortable – she had never been this alone with Dumbledore before – Harry had always been there.

“Ron, Hermione – I’m going to dispense with formalities here due to the urgency – I need to know why Harry went to the Department of Mysteries.”

Ron threw Hermione a nervous glance that said *you talk, not me*. Clearing her throat awkwardly, she turned back to Dumbledore’s painting, feeling distinctly disconcerted.

“He was looking for Rookwood – he thought that the Death Eater had chosen to hide in the Department, given that it had been abandoned by the Ministry and given his familiarity.” She swallowed hard. “We didn’t get far in before we encountered that Orb. Do you know anything about it, Professor?”

Dumbledore looked grim. “I know very little about the *oulenkeynes*. Reportedly from another world, they have the power to transport others based upon one’s mental strength. At one point, there had been three, and I remember the Ministry’s efforts to round them up – they’re very dangerous, as you can suspect.”

“Why were they sent to the Department of Mysteries?” Ron asked, perplexed. “What about the division that deals with magical artifacts in the Ministry? Wouldn’t they be better prepared to deal with an Orb?”

Dumbledore fixed Ron with a penetrating stare. “Ron, the *oulenkeynes* are not of our world – no other division besides the Department of Mysteries would be *qualified* to deal with them. Unfortunately, these Orbs were in the possession of notable pureblood families when the recall order was dispatched. The Prince family and the Black family surrendered theirs, but one family refused – particularly the patriarch of the family.”

Hermione understood. “Abraxus Malfoy.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Exactly. From everything we discovered after his return and untimely death, the *oulenkeyne* somehow transported him to a different realm. Where it took him, nobody knows, but he *did* eventually return, albeit without the *oulenkeyne* and infected with dragon pox.”

“And Snape planned to pass the Prince Orb to Nicci, but that still leaves us one short,” Ron said, counting on his fingers. “Who took the last one?” An eager look entered his eyes. “Does that mean we have a chance to follow them?”

“Ron, that would be incredibly dangerous!”

“Fortunately, it would also be impossible,” Dumbledore interrupted. “From what Professor Snape managed to tell me, the final Orb was stolen by the last survivor of the purge that Voldemort conducted of the Department of Mysteries. With outside assistance, he reportedly disappeared, and hasn’t been seen since.”

“And who was that man who vanished?” Ron asked curiously.

Dumbledore’s face looked surprisingly grim. “Cassius Croaker.”

--

“They left out the good parts of our story.”

“Probably because they aren’t important and irrelevant, Garren. I didn’t think that old man wanted to go into details about how you showed up.”

“I was just mentioned as ‘outside assistance!’ I’m hurt.”

“Get over it. Surely you’re pride can handle that mortal blow.”

“There’s no need to be sarcastic.”

“Really? I never would have guessed that.”

There was a short pause, and then, “I never knew your name was Cassius.”

“Drop it.”

“That seems almost literary of you. What’s that Muggle author in your world who used that name... it’s on the tip of my brain...”

"The man's name was Shakespeare, and the play was "Julius Caesar." Happy?"

"What was that about? What role did your namesake play?"

"Why do you assume I'm an expert in classical Muggle literature?"

"Because you are a man of many layers. Strata, if you will..."

"You sound like an utter idiot. Be quiet before you hurt yourself."

"So what was the play about?"

"Well, there was a man named Julius Caesar who was dictator of an empire centered in the city of Rome. He was loved by the people, but the officials who ran the Senate beneath him wanted him dead. Cassius was the main instigator of the crime and he was the one who convinced Brutus – that's one of the most influential senators – to join in the assassination plot."

"So whatever happened to him in the end?"

"Killed himself. Ran himself through on his own sword, if I remember correctly."

"Almost ironic how much it compares to this situation, isn't it?"

"Except the roles are exchanged. I'm the reluctant one while you are the tempter."

"Well, that wasn't what I was thinking..."

"But it's the truth, and you know that as much as I do."

There was another long silence, finally broken in the darkness.

"Does this mean I can call you Cassie?"

"Oh, shut up."

--

Hermione paced around the office nervously. "So where exactly are the Malfoys and Mrs. Weasley going to get Snape's painting from?"

"*Professor* Snape's painting, Hermione," Dumbledore said sternly. "They are likely retrieving it from the original artist's home."

"Why would it be kept there, and not in the office?" Ron asked curiously. "Seems awfully inconvenient to go and get it from the original artist."

Dumbledore let the hint of a smile come onto his face. "Very good, Ron, and in most cases you're right. The Head paintings are nearly always kept in the homes of the original artists until the Headmaster or Headmistress passes away. It's traditional. Then, when the Head passes away, the painting magically appears in the office. Unfortunately," Dumbledore added with a deep sigh, "Severus made it very clear to the painter that he only wanted his painting hung in the Head's office when 'proper time came', and given the confusion after the Battle of Hogwarts, it was never retrieved, either by magic or by hand."

Hermione frowned. "That's a strange thing for Professor Snape to do. I mean," she hastily added at the look on Ron's face, "I don't understand the man very well, but wouldn't he *want* his legacy as a Headmaster to be remembered? Where is the painting, anyways?"

Dumbledore sighed again. "At the estate of the Dolohov family."

For a second Hermione couldn't speak. *Antonin Dolohov, a painter? The man who nearly killed me? It's impossible...*

But Ron beat her to the punch. "Are you saying that –"

"Don't act so surprised, Ron." Dumbledore remarked, a note of definite disgust and surprising bitterness in his voice. "It's rare for one to consider Death Eaters as human, especially from our side. The Ministry is worse, but still..."

"I mean, well, Snape was obviously different, but *Dolohov*?" Ron's voice was incredulous. "He's a murderer, he killed my uncles, my Mum's brothers..."

"I taught him at Hogwarts," Dumbledore said quietly. "And I knew him quite well, as I knew his family. And from all of the boys I expected to go to Voldemort, he was one I never would have guessed. Rookwood's the same, but I'll get to that later. It's unfortunate, really, that I never got the chance to communicate everything I discovered and knew about the Death Eaters to Harry – he could have used it. Yet Voldemort had to be the primary target – the Death Eaters could always come later."

"Well, not to be offensive or anything, but you were never really free with information when you were alive, Professor," Ron remarked bluntly, ignoring Hermione's scandalized expressions. "Harry trusted you – hell, Hermione and I trusted you too – and you barely gave us anything. So tell us about Dolohov and exactly *why* he became a psychopath."

"Dolohov is not, and never will be, a psychopath," Dumbledore said sternly. "For one to be considered psychopathic, it implies an antisocial mental disorder. Antonin Dolohov did not have a mental disorder. If anything, he is as rational and clear-thinking now as he was forty years ago, when I taught him."

"So how exactly did he hook up with You-Know-Who?"

Dumbledore settled back into his painted chair and folded his hands. "Antonin Dolohov was the youngest and only son of the Dolohov line. He had three sisters, the eldest being a Squib who died in a car accident ten years ago. The other two sisters married young to members of other houses, not bothering about whether or not their spouses were pureblood.

"You see, Antonin's father was an Auror from a long line of Aurors, all the way back to the famed Robert Dolohov in the 1740s. But from an early age, Antonin expressed no interest at all in joining the Aurors. I think this hurt Antonin's father more than he let on, for he was a very cold man, who had fought in the Second World War – by my side, as a matter of fact, in the combat against Grindelwald's forces. Unfortunately, this coldness led to a very uncomfortable relationship between Antonin and his father, and they never had a close bond.

“Antonin, for his part, was a gifted and extremely creative child, and he had a great fondness for Quidditch, and more importantly, its tactics. When he arrived at Hogwarts, he was Sorted into Slytherin, but almost seemed to be completely oblivious to the pureblood politics that surrounded him. He loved to paint, and he always seemed discouraged that Hogwarts never had an art program.

“He was also a very bright boy, excelling in nearly all his classes. He was inventing spells by his second year – the same year, ironically, when he joined the Slytherin Quidditch team as a Chaser, where he excelled greatly. By fourth year he was Quidditch Captain, and he led the Slytherin team to four straight Cup victories.” A fond expression seemed to cross Dumbledore’s painted face for a second.

“Yet, unlike all the boys who loved to flaunt their brilliant skills at Quidditch, Antonin was only concerned with his victories. He did not attend the parties or the celebrations that followed his successful matches – instead he would go to the library or to a private place, where he could relax, recuperate, or create new spells. He loved clever wordplay, but he tended to regard the pureblood social events with disdain. In his opinion, why would he associate with folk who, in his words, ‘irritated the hell out of him’?”

Ron chuckled. “Sounds a lot like you, Hermione.”

“I wouldn’t actually use that language,” Hermione replied stiffly. “So how did this precocious child end up becoming the murderer that he is today?” Despite herself, she was becoming very uncomfortable with Dumbledore’s ‘humanizing’ of a Death Eater that had nearly killed her. *It’s so much easier to think of them as monsters deserving of this...*

Dumbledore sighed. “Well, when Antonin graduated, he was offered the captaincy of the English Quidditch team. Now to be offered a position like that right out of Hogwarts was exceptional, and Antonin was ecstatic. He led that team through a rough two years of frustrating defeat, yet things were destined to look up. The team got several new players and they were winning game after game.”

Dumbledore grimaced. “Unfortunately, the Ministry began to take interest. They appointed a new coach for the team, and he and

Antonin did not get along well at all. They kept winning games, and made it to the semifinals of the Quidditch World Cup, but Dolohov's conflicts with the coach kept getting worse and worse. Finally, England made it to the Quidditch World Cup against Belgium, to be held in the Netherlands that year. Antonin was confident in the days coming up to the match – his team had never played better, and his new tactics were working flawlessly.”

“Yet the night before the final game, the English coach was offered an enormous sum of money by a group of rich pureblood gamblers for England to *lose the match*.”

Ron's eyes went wide. “I heard about that! That was a huge scandal across the Channel, and England didn't get back in the cup until a few decades later! Are you telling me Dolohov was *involved*?”

“Antonin didn't go along with the coach's scheming at all,” Dumbledore said sharply. “He wanted to win as much as anybody, and at that time, the Belgian team was one of the best in the world. So he ignored the coach's offer and chose to play to win anyways.”

“But then the coach went to one of the Beaters and paid him off so that he could incapacitate the Seeker with a ‘mis-hit’ Bludger, right?” Ron said excitedly. “Only the captain was blamed for all of it, not the coach...” His voice trailed off as he made the realization.

“That's right,” Dumbledore nodded sadly. “The English team still nearly won with Antonin leading the Chasers, but without a Seeker, they had little chance to win. And the coach, his pockets full of his winning, made a point of attending a press conference where he threw all of the blame on the English team's loss on Antonin, casting the illegal deal as being done by the star chaser, not the greedy and grasping coach.

“So Antonin was drummed out of the Quidditch leagues, a move that devastated him. Worse still, he was brought before the Wizengamot and prosecuted for ‘attempting to fix the match’. Fortunately for him, I was the Chief Justice of the Wizengamot at the time, and I managed to get him off. Unfortunately, the Dolohov name was irreparably tarnished.”

“But how did all of that manage to drive Dolohov to the Death Eaters?” Hermione asked, trying to quash the rising sympathy for the disgraced Quidditch player out of her heart.

“It gave him a reason – a very good reason, mind you – to distrust the Ministry of Magic. It became his strongest excuse to his irate father for not joining the Aurors. Instead, he took a job as a portrait painter for pureblood families, and made extra money by writing and publishing unique spellbooks. In fact, a few are even in our library. Unfortunately for him, when he was commissioned for a portrait by Abraxus Malfoy, he met Mr. Malfoy’s guest that evening as well – Lord Voldemort.”

Ron winced. “That couldn’t have gone over well.”

“Well, Antonin wasn’t the slightest bit interested in joining Voldemort, but he did acknowledge that both of them shared a marked distrust for the government. And to be quite frank, there was nothing that Voldemort had that Antonin wanted. For his part, Antonin just wanted to be left alone – he was not fond of the press, especially after they ruined his family name.”

“For a while, it seemed like Antonin’s fortunes were improving. He married a Scottish pureblood witch with a very fiery personality and continued to publish his spellbooks. The last book he published, *Wit of the Duelist*, was a best-seller.” Dumbledore gestured at the wall filled with books. “I believe I have copy over there myself.

“Unfortunately, a very unwelcome character emerged from Antonin’s past – the coach that had cost England the World Cup. Irate and extremely jealous of Antonin’s success, he sued his former team captain for plagiarism in *Wit of the Duelist*.”

Hermione snorted. “From the sounds of it, Dolohov wouldn’t have plagiarized – it wouldn’t have fit his ideology. And besides, he sounds too independent to rely on anyone else.”

Dumbledore smiled. “An astute analogy, Hermione, but one that was not made by the Ministry of Magic. Hauled before the Wizengamot again, Antonin made his case with the aid of some of the best legal professionals he could recruit, and indeed, his case seemed a done

deal. Unfortunately, at the very same time I was at a meeting of the International Confederation of Wizards in Corsica, that coach paid a very intelligent forgery artist to make a clever copy of *Wit of the Duelist*, but under the coach's name instead. If I had been there, I would have detected the forgery immediately, but as it was, Antonin was convicted and fined thousands of Galleons in reparations to the coach, as well as five years in Azkaban."

"But that's not fair; couldn't he have appealed the decision?" Hermione asked heatedly.

Dumbledore sighed. "He was planning to do exactly that, but Voldemort got to him first. While Antonin was sitting in a containment cell in the Ministry, Voldemort came to visit. They talked for several hours on many topics, and who can only know what words were exchanged between them. I suspect, however, that Voldemort played on Antonin's righteous anger and turned him against the Ministry.

"That night, Antonin left the Ministry of Magic in the company of Voldemort, planning to seek revenge on the coach that had ruined his life and reputation. When the Aurors discovered, however, that he was not in his cell, they immediately went to his home. His wife was extremely displeased by the intrusion, and in the resulting brawl, she was accidentally killed by a falling timber."

Hermione put her hand to her mouth. Ron simply looked sickened.

"As you can guess, Antonin was grief-stricken and livid when he found out – especially when he found evidence that the same forgery artist who was responsible for his conviction was also responsible for his wife's death – evidence that Voldemort planted. So, on Voldemort's advice, he decided to turn his back on the Ministry and personally track down the forgery artist and the coach. When he found both of them, he tortured both of them to death with spells he created – just punishment, he believed, for their crimes. When he returned to Voldemort, he took the Dark Mark and has been working against the Ministry ever since."

Dumbledore sighed. "Suffice to say, I was greatly saddened when Antonin Dolohov joined the Death Eaters. He now believes that the Ministry is corrupt and must be replaced. His creativity has not

diminished, nor has his skill with tactics – only now, those skills served Voldemort. He has developed a form of twisted sadism, in which he believes that those he tortures deserve the justice he is giving. However, his independent spirit remains intact, and I personally believe, despite his many crimes, that he *could* be redeemed. Azkaban has embittered him, but there is still hope. Unfortunately, the Ministry will never see it that way.”

Hermione felt sick. She had just heard the tragic story of a man who fell to darkness because of pure bad luck and Voldemort’s scheming. His soul had been twisted as badly as his face, but despite everything, there *was* a possibility of redemption. *Unlike Bellatrix*, she thought with a chill. *She was a psychopath through and through, though that might have been more due to inbreeding than anything else...*

“Professor Dumbledore,” she finally began quietly, “why did you tell us all of this? Dolohov’s story’s tragic, but it’s not as if we can really do anything to fix it. He’s going to spend the rest of his life in Azkaban.”

“Because it shows you humanity behind the mask that few ever see. I can guess that Antonin Dolohov still grieves for his wife every single day, a grief that will never attain satisfaction. It shows you that a person – any person – always has some good in him.” Dumbledore smiled wistfully. “And because Dolohov will likely be one of the few people that will be able to bring Harry and the others back.”

Hermione was speechless. *How-*

But before she could stammer a question, the door slid open again and Lucius, Narcissa, and Mrs. Weasley entered, carrying a massive, mahogany-framed portrait between them. Hermione could not restrain a gasp as she saw the dark eyes, lank hair, and disdainful sneer of Severus Snape again.

“Ah, welcome back, Severus,” Dumbledore said amiably. “It’s about time you got here. Has Lucius already explained the situation to you?”

"As much as can be expected," Snape replied icily. "Unfortunately, in this case, I cannot give much aid, Dumbledore. As a portrait, I cannot do much."

"But you can explain why you sent that message to Nicci on your will," Narcissa growled, her long nails digging into her palms. "I saw it. *Mind over matter. Take three and flee. The River has split. It is coming. Mind over matter...*"

"*Until it all ends*," Snape finished curtly. "Yes, I know, Narcissa. I did send that message for a reason, but it is one that cannot be revealed, upon pain of my own obliteration."

Dumbledore frowned. "Severus, you are in no danger. Your soul should have gone on... unless...but it can't be..."

"The River has split'," Snape quoted mockingly, his voice grating with caustic disdain. "You know what that means, Dumbledore. For those who have a place in that stream, there is a possibility of crossing. Suffice to say, I have crossed and am content. There's nothing more I can say."

"There's *plenty* more you can say, Snape!" Lucius said furiously. "Where's Draco? Where's Nicci? You obviously know something!"

"Lucius, you must understand something, and I'm only going to say this once," Snape said, his soft voice seeming to silence the room. "*I can't say anything. I can't* interfere in this world, only where I am *now*. I can't tell you where Nicci and Draco are, but if they used the *oulenkeyne*, they are beyond this world entirely."

"So you're telling me that there's no way we can get Harry or Ginny back?" Ron asked, rage filling his face. "You conceited little —"

"I did *not* say I can't help bring them back, Mr. Weasley," Snape snapped. "Although this world *would* be significantly better without Potter's inflated ego, he is in enormous danger where he is right now; that I *can* tell you."

"It seems impossible," Dumbledore mused, seemingly oblivious to the arguments with his fellow portrait. "Unless he somehow went *back*..."

"Of course he did, it's the only way things *could* have changed," Snape spat. "He also opened the floodgates for passage, and *he* has already migrated across."

Dumbledore's painted face went white. "It's impossible. He must have known the conjectures..."

"Of course he did, but he only ensured them with his desperate foolishness." Snape turned away and shook his head with disgust. "No matter what, all rivers lead to the ocean."

"But what can we *do*, then, to get them back?" Hermione asked, very real panic entering her voice. "You said you can help us!"

Snape finally fixed his eyes on Hermione, a snide grin sliding across his face. "Are you sure you *want* to know, Miss Granger? It wouldn't be pleasant, especially for you. Are you prepared to cross into a 'hell like no other'?"

Hermione swallowed hard. "Ron and I just want Harry and Ginny back. Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy just want Malfoy and your sister back. If you can help, I want to hear it."

The hook-nosed picture eyed her for a very long time, and then finally said in a low voice. "I can do very little, but the only way to find them is to find a Delta Crossing."

"Severus, you know better than anyone –" Dumbledore began, an edge in his voice, but Snape cut him off.

"They asked for my help, and I have given it. The bleed has started, and it'll go both ways. Give them the book you were entrusted with... they'll figure it out... eventually. Now if you'd excuse me, I have a place to return to." And with a final sneer, Severus Snape walked out of the painting.

Hermione spun to Dumbledore, who looked very pale. "Well?" she asked. "Where is this book?"

The painting was silent for a long time, but finally Dumbledore sighed. “I can’t deny Harry this – not now. Third book on the left next to the silver vials, on the top shelf of the right case.”

She wasn’t tall enough to reach the book, but before she could draw her wand, Ron had already pulled down the book and was holding it for her to see. Bound in blue-black leather, it was embossed with dull grey runes that she couldn’t read.

But the title was clear enough: *The Twin Streams: A Study of Inverse Worlds*.

Ron inhaled sharply as he pointed at the author names. “Look at the names... blimey...”

Hermione looked down at the two names and felt her skin crawl.

By Tisos Garren the Prophet & Lord Voldemort.

Chapter 13

“GET DOWN!” a voice screamed, and Draco could only feel a hand on the scruff of his jacket as he was yanked down below the table. He swore at the unexpected pressure and drawing his wand, he prepared to snap an angry response to the undignified pull.

Less than a second later, a familiar blinding green light illuminated the booth as the cloaked figures let loose their first attack, striking at the place where Draco had been only seconds before. He could hear the walls splinter as the Killing Curses tore through the walls with terrific force.

Maybe not the best time to argue, then...

Suddenly, the curses suddenly stopped, the rushing sound replaced by a flurry of loud cracks that Draco recognized instantly – gunfire.

At that second, pandemonium erupted. From his precarious position, he could see the crowd fighting, fists and pistols and wands flying everywhere as tables collapsed or were tossed aside. The screaming from terrified women (who Draco guessed did *not* have weapons and were likely in for the fight of their lives) went to a fever pitch, but it was almost immediately broken by the sound of more gunfire...

“DRACO!”

At the call of his name, he flattened himself against the booth, as another Killing Curse shot by him, inches away from singeing his suit. *Damn, too close!*

“Snap out of it, we need to get Harry and get out of here!” Ginny screamed, her wand already drawn, and her hand on his collar.

Harry, right, Draco thought, his eyes scanning the crowd and immediately fixing on his former nemesis. Prudently (and thus surprisingly), he had dove behind a thrown table and was slowing making his way towards the bar, which had been hit by a stray curse and was now smoking. *But how the hell do I get to him without getting in that melee?*

Another curse slammed into the booth, and Draco heard a muffled curse. For the first time, he noticed that both Keith and Twin were under the table too, and both had weapons drawn, trying to aim at the cloaked figures, which were now streaming into the crowd, wands blazing...

"What about you?" he shouted, even as another curse went high and slammed into the booth.

"I'm sure Twin and Keith have an emergency exit here *somewhere*," Ginny shot back, her eyes blazing as she watched as Ziani and his men, all armed with heavy rifles, rain fire into the crowd from behind a makeshift barricade of tables. "Just get Harry, I'll catch up with you later!"

"Right, and explain to Harry how you died? I don't think so." Seized with a sudden impulse, he grabbed Ginny's arm and twisted, concentrating hard. *There might not be wards here...*

He felt an extremely tight sensation all over his body, but less than a second later, he was behind the fallen table where Harry was hiding from the melee, wand drawn and ready to attack. Draco himself nearly got a wand in the eye before Harry recognized him.

"How...?"

"Apparition. It doesn't matter, we need to get —"

Another volley of curses slammed into the booth Draco and Ginny just vacated, and with the shuddering crack of breaking wood and the screech of bending metal, the booth exploded into a haze of smoke, burning fabric, and shattered glass. For a second, Draco froze — he hadn't seen Keith or Twin get away...

But a second later, the thought was driven out of his mind by the newest loud noise — a bang that shook the room as the massive main doors flew open to reveal a horde of black-garbed, hooded figures.

"Who are *they*?" Harry shouted, even the newest arrivals all drew weapons *and* wands and charged into the milling crowd, shooting and cursing with every step.

"Who cares, they just blocked our escape route!" Draco replied, his eyes scanning the rapidly growing melee.

"Just Apparate out!" Ginny screamed, leaning around the edge of the table and firing a Stunning spell at one of the cloaked figures, only to miss and blow a considerable hole in a nearby table.

"Might be warded, we can't risk it!" Draco replied hurriedly. "There's got to be some way out..."

A stray curse streaked over Ginny's head, only to slam directly into a large speaker wedged into the wall. Suddenly, with a squeal, the sound system came online – at full volume.

Suddenly, a loud voice filled the room, with the gunfire on the track crudely mimicking the *real* shots inside the hall.

"One shot, two shots, three shots, four shots,

All I hear is gunshots, this is where the fun stops,

Bodies drop, hit the floor, music's off, party stops,

Everybody hit the door, somebody's makin' shots off..."

A loud baritone voice came over the speakers now, making Draco's eardrums quake, but he blocked out the noise. "Come on, let's get moving!" he shouted at Harry and Ginny, but from the bewildered looks on their faces, he doubted either of them could hear a thing. *Figures*, he thought scathingly.

But Draco saw several people turn towards the pounding speaker behind him and draw their weapons... no doubt they wanted to shut off the annoying music and get back to killing each other...

"MOVE!" he roared, and grabbing Ginny and Harry with both hands, he ran towards the bar, now much worse for wear given the repeated rounds of curses and machine gun bullets that had slammed into it.

A second later, a round of curses had blown the speaker into scrap metal. *There goes an investment*, Draco thought sardonically, even as he vaulted over the bar, Ginny and Harry right behind him.

But they weren't alone behind the bar. The waiter that Draco had bribed earlier that night was frantically dialing a code into a safe set beneath the bar – one that to Draco's point of view seemed much too permanent.

"Is that a way out?" he yelled. The waiter started, but continued typing. A second later, the safe cracked open –

To reveal a single open shaft, leading straight down into darkness. There were no rails or bars to hold onto, but the waiter didn't seem to care. Taking a deep breath, he dove into the shaft.

Draco, Harry, and Ginny all exchanged looks. Could they risk it?

A second later, the round of curses slamming into the bar made their decision easy.

Harry pushed Ginny forward. "You go first, then Draco, then me! I'll hold 'em off!"

Draco was about to raise an objection, but Harry then shot Draco a blazing glare that said *don't argue, just do it*.

"This is no time to be heroic, Harry!" Draco roared, as Ginny slid into the shaft.

Harry only smirked as he drew a second wand from a pocket in his suit. Draco recognized it instantly – he had seen it in the hands of the Dark Lord.

The Elder Wand.

Draco remembered what Harry had mentioned about the wand in combat with the Dark Lord, how the Dark Lord had stolen the wand from Dumbledore's tomb and had killed Severus Snape to gain mastery of it. How it hadn't been Snape who was the master all along, but Draco, and when Harry had disarmed him at Malfoy Manor, the

most powerful wand in existence had transferred its allegiance to Harry. How Harry had sworn never to use it.

Why was he daring to bring it out now?

"It'll hold 'em off, Draco, don't worry!" Harry shouted. "Now go!"

If he gets us all killed, I'll never forgive him, Draco thought darkly, diving head-first into the shaft.

--

"I do assume I am *not* under arrest," Clifford Thomas said coolly, taking a half-step away from Lupin. The werewolf threw his partner a sharp look, which Thomas conveniently ignored. "I mean, *I* was unaware of any treasonous plot."

"As a matter of fact, so was I," Lupin added loudly.

Black smirked. "Well, Moony, one must realize that in your current state, one must view charges a bit more...ah, *subjectively*, I think is the right term. You engaged a Shiy-Mord, and not only did you let her escape you *twice*, you refused to notify the League of your whereabouts in the search."

"And if you had bothered to be in the country at the time when she was first spotted, and had bothered to truly *listen* to Thomas' call, which your pal Prongs conveniently took over and bungled," Lupin snarled, an edge in his voice, "that the target I was chasing was *not* a Shiy-Mord. Apparently, you also ignored the entirety of the conversation that passed here as well between Miss Nicci and I, or otherwise you would have discovered that such a mistake would have been easy."

"About that... conversation, Moony," Potter said slowly, his eyes burning with an interest that Nicci found vaguely disturbing, although she couldn't quite pin down why. "I heard my name mentioned."

"No, you didn't," Nicci replied evenly, "and I'm not saying anymore." She subtly shifted her stance to a combat position – leaning forward, on the balls of her feet – and leveled her Uzi at Potter. She kept her

wand trained on Black – she didn't know what to expect from him, but she was prepared to counter with her worst if he tried anything. "And before you even try it, forget Legilimency – I'm too good of an Occlumens –"

"I knew she looked familiar!" Potter interrupted, his eyes glittering as he turned to Black. "Padfoot, it's *his* daughter, with *her* – one of them!"

"And so begins the meeting of the pronoun club," Thomas remarked sardonically, but Nicci watched as the black man's hand inched towards his wand.

"I thought he only had *two* daughters," Black replied warily, his eyes now raking Nicci. "And last that I checked, one's dead and one's a Shiy-Mord. And none of *his* daughters would have ice-blue eyes..."

Nicci ignored Black's voice as he turned to talk to Potter. Instead, she nudged Lupin with her skirt.

"What?" Lupin replied tersely.

"Any ideas? On how to escape?"

"Those wands are silver-pointed – they imbue silver into every spell, fatal for werewolves – and the wards set up prevent Apparition – not like I would have done it anyways, the Dark Lord would detect it too fast. Do *you* have any ideas?"

Nicci's mind whirled. *Don't want to bluff my way out of this one – I don't know how much information I want to leak yet. Bad odds in fighting, even if Thomas is on our side. And even if I wanted to call for reinforcements, I don't know how well Potter, Ginny, and my beloved brother would stand up to these people... whoever they are...*

"...All I'm saying is that it could be one of them. Hell, she could even be a Shiy-Mord that we haven't seen yet, there are plenty of those," Potter said tensely, his eyes flickering over to Nicci, who slid away from Lupin slightly to set her back against the trailer. She ignored his gaze, as an idea was already coalescing in her head. *I could try and run – my car is still here and I bet I could outrun them. The key would*

be creating a big enough distraction while keeping Lupin alive – I still need him. A good Reductor curse to that rear tire should do it...

Slowly, ever so surely, she began to lower her wand and reverse it in her hand. Her timing would have to be perfect – still keeping her guard up until the last second. *Besides, now that I have my wand back, I don't want to be disarmed.*

She saw Lupin tense, his own wand lowering slowly. She didn't know what the werewolf had in mind, but she saw him exchange a terse nod with Thomas – it looked as if they had a plan after all. And Potter and Black were still arguing, their attention still distracted. Nicci wasn't sure about the four figures in the back, but it seemed they were focusing more on Lupin's movement than hers.

Big mistake.

She counted off the timer in her head, her wand dropping lower and lower...

Three... two... one...

Almost on cue, she heard the sound. A ringing sound, emerging from a hidden pocket in her skirt. A rather *loud* ringing sound.

Her cell phone.

Potter and Black looked at her instantly, and their wands immediately shifted to point at her. "What was that?"

Nicci let a dull flush creep into her features, but inside, she was seething. *I'm going to kill the asshole who called me here and now... operational security totally compromised... and unless the Dark Lord himself has shown up at K-Crank's party...*

She froze. What if the Dark Lord *had* somehow crashed the party – after all, Crouch had been a Death Eater in her world, and he certainly would have a problem with Keith's lawless pursuits. *Especially if he's running a legitimate government...*

“Well?” Potter snarled, stepping closer and raising his wand an inch from her eye. “What’s that sound?”

“My cell phone,” Nicci replied coolly, sliding her Uzi into her jacket and prying her cell phone out of her purse. It was blinking and still making an infernal ringing noise, and she was tempted to curse it straight to pieces. “Can I answer it?”

Lupin froze and threw a horrified look at Potter, who seemed to be considering the option. Finally, the dark-haired man shrugged. “I don’t see why not, but put it on speaker-phone – I believe that function is available – so we can *all* hear.”

So much for passing a quick ‘reinforcements, quick’ message, but really, what did I expect anyways? Nicci pressed the answer button on her phone and quickly flicked on the speaker phone, but not before catching a glimpse of the call display. *Draco’s making the call... shit, he knows better than to contact me right now unless something’s gone terribly wrong...*

“Yes?” she said, speaking clearly into the phone. “I can hear you, brother.”

Draco’s voice cracked onto the phone, clearly audible in the small clearing, and Nicci could detect the edge in the otherwise placid tone. “We have a problem.”

“Really? So do I, at the moment.” Nicci glanced up at Potter and Black, who were both smirking at her discomfort. *Arrogant bastards*, she thought darkly. “The meeting hasn’t really... gone as planned.”

“Nor has the reception where I’m at. Let’s just say that our *surprising arrival* brought backup and tried to cause the three of us some *mutual discomfort*.”

Nicci swore under her breath – Crouch was involved, and from the slightly strained note in Draco’s voice, it wasn’t good. “Who was the backup?”

“One of the three groups you mentioned crashed the party with a bunch of, ah, *bringers of justice*. Your kind of justice, if you catch my drift.”

Lupin threw Thomas a panicked gaze, which the black man returned with a simple nod of understanding. *They know that the Others crashed Keith’s party, and from the looks of things, Crouch is still working for the Dark Lord if he’s bringing in Death Eaters.*

Black and Potter, however, only exchanged confused looks. It was clear they weren’t really following the conversation. *Thank God for that*, Nicci thought, *‘cause if they were, we’d be in a much deeper hole than we are now.*

“So where are you planning to go?” Nicci asked carefully. “Are you three all right?”

“I was actually hoping I could meet up with *you*,” Draco remarked sardonically, “but I guess that would probably not be the best choice of actions. As for how we are... well, the other pretty-boy is starting to concern me.”

“For the last time, I don’t care about how he treats the girl, it’s not your business,” Nicci replied, artfully disguising her smile behind a disgusted air. But a prickle of worry passed through her mind. *What the hell is Harry doing now?*

“I still think she’s better off with somebody else, but that’s not the issue,” Draco replied, his voice dropping. “He’s decided to utilize a weapon that, until now, I did not realize was in his arsenal.”

Nicci frowned. What the hell could that pretty-boy possess that would be powerful or effective against a magical attack...

Suddenly, she understood. *Oh shit, why didn’t I see this coming?* She struggled to keep her face a blank mask – the last thing she needed was Potter or Black to suspect something...

Unfortunately, both Black and Potter caught the word ‘weapon’, and their eyes narrowed. “You’ve got explaining to do, girl,” Potter growled. “What weapon is your caller talking about?”

“Who is that on the other line?” Draco asked, his voice cracking. “Nicci? What’s going on –”

The call cut off, but it was not due to any frequency troubles. Nicci clicked her cell phone off entirely and slid it back into her skirt, eyeing Potter and Black balefully.

“Who was that caller?” Black growled, stepping even closer. “And what was that weapon?”

“When that information becomes your business, I’ll tell you,” Nicci hissed, her own wand slowly dropping back towards the tire.

“I don’t recall giving you permission to –”

“*REDUCTO!*”

The tire split in two from the explosion, and Nicci could hear the shocks shudder as the trailer’s weight shifted. Nearly everyone looked up at the teetering load of rusted metal that shivered above them – except Nicci, who was already moving, and Thomas, whose wand was already rising...

“They’re trying to escape!” Potter roared. “Take them alive, if you can, and be careful with the were-”

But the Potter couldn’t finish the sentence for the fist that Nicci had driven into his stomach. Ducking under his outstretched wand, she had hammered him in the gut and followed it up with a simple flex of her knee. *Just for flavor.*

Potter doubled over, clutching his groin. Nicci yanked her Uzi free and hit the groaning wizard across the face with it. *Like father, like son*, she thought wryly.

But Black was still in the fight, and a second later, Nicci felt her Uzi get ripped out of her hands. From the blaze of light to the side of her, it seemed that Black and Potter’s backup were only targeting Lupin and Thomas, leaving Nicci for Black alone.

She slid her knife out of her glove and held it in her other hand, balancing lightly as Black came forward, an eager expression on his face.

“You’re quite the fiery one, aren’t you?” Black taunted, his black hair rippling as he dodged a Reductor curse Nicci threw at the man’s face. “And totally undetectable by the Dark Lord, too? You would do well in our forces...”

Nicci barked out a cold laugh. “And I turned down Lupin’s offer to accept yours? *Fat chance*, Black. I’m not as gullible as your godson.”

Black froze. “I don’t have a godson... do you know me somehow?”

Nicci smirked. “Better. I know your godson – I’m travelling with him as we speak.”

Black’s dark eyes smoldered as he threw another curse at her, but she rolled to the side and let the curse ricochet off the trailer. *That was too close*, Nicci thought, a pit beginning to open in her stomach. *Time to even the score a bit. SECTUMSEMPRA!*

Black could only gasp as the spell sliced through his hasty Shield Charm and deep into his legs. He howled in pain, clutching at the wounds...

But that was all the time Nicci needed. She dove for her Uzi on the gravel, shredding part of her skirt and ripping a hole in her dress as she picked it up and came back up into a crouch to survey the situation. Black was bleeding on the pavement, but Potter was already getting up, and Lupin and Thomas were already on their heels.

Gotta even their odds, Nicci thought, and raising her Uzi, she let loose a stream of gunfire, ripping through two of the cloaked figures and narrowly missing a third.

Painful screams tore through the night, but Nicci ignored them and the spray of blood that erupted across the pavement. She clenched her jaw as some of the blood fell on her high boots, but she didn’t

bother to wipe them clean. *I've had blood on my boots before, especially from people I've cut down...*

She heard a grunt from behind her. She began to swivel, but rough hands slid under her arms and yanked her back. Her Uzi fell from her hands, but she managed to stow her wand in her boot before anyone could notice. A wand was held to her throat, and she could hear Potter's heavy breathing behind her.

"I don't know where you learned Sectumsempra, but you nearly killed my closest friend," Potter hissed furiously, jabbing his wand up against her neck. "I can forgive a lot of things, but not that. You're coming with us, and if I have my way, I'll let Sirius decide what to do with you once we have your information."

Nicci swore and struggled fiercely, but Potter shoved a foot between her legs, preventing her from moving too much. From her limited view, she could already see Black groaning the song-like counterspell to Sectumsempra to heal his legs.

"Nicci —" Lupin shouted, downing the last of the figures with a single spell and turning towards her. He raised his wand, but Thomas grabbed his shoulder.

"Smart decision, Cliff," Potter remarked snidely, dragging Nicci backwards with his wand still at her throat. "I have no quarrel with you, but if you don't restrain Moony over there, you'll share his sentence."

Lupin's eyes burned with fury. "You're outnumbered now, Prongs. You and Padfoot can't take down Nicci and me without killing at least one of us."

"And after your betrayal, I could do that," Black growled, staggering over to where Potter was standing and grabbing Nicci's arm. "With the greatest regret, but this little bitch tried to kill me, and we all know where *you* stand!"

"I stand with a group of people who haven't *given* up, and who won't vacillate on the sidelines while the Dark Lord is out there killing people!" Lupin said, a livid expression on his face. "And you *dare* to

talk about *my* betrayal? I told the truth – I was tired of lying for you two bastards. And after what you did to *Lily* –”

Potter froze for a second, but suddenly his angry expression vanished with a cold stare. “Rachel’s better than that filthy whore ever was... she *deserves* to be with –”

It seemed like the words caused Lupin to lose any vestige of human control he might have had. His eyes blazing with insane fury, he threw his head back and let loose a single, rage-filled howl.

Nicci, despite herself, was terrified. She had never seen a werewolf transform before, but from the muscles that were contorting and expanding in Lupin’s back, arms, and chest, she guessed that was what was happening.

“Oh, *shit*,” Black muttered, throwing a panicked gaze at Potter. “It’s not the full moon tonight, is it?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore for him,” Potter replied, taking a few steps back and dragging Nicci with him. He wasn’t the only one – Thomas was rapidly retreating back too – and for the first time, Nicci could detect a tremble in the man’s normally smooth voice. “He stole one of the Twin Disciplines...”

Nicci cast a quick gaze up at the sky. The moon was hanging in the sky, only half-full, but it was somehow giving more light than it should have been... almost as if it was full...

Lupin, meanwhile, was only becoming more and more bestial every second. His eyes blazed with savage fury, and greenish light began to stream from his deep-set eyes...

Nicci felt herself shoved into Black’s hands, and she heard Potter holler, “I’ll hold him off – just get this bitch to your estate before the Dark Lord finds us!”

“How’s Potter going to pull *that* off?” Nicci remarked snidely to Black as she began to struggle again, but the answer seemed to become apparent in a second as the dark-haired man seemed to transform in

mid-step into a massive, antlered stag. *Of course, I forgot that Potter was an Animagus... and it makes sense with his nickname...*

But the stag seemed pitifully small compared to the massive werewolf that was now howling and growling at the charging stag. *Hope you waste him, Lupin, Nicci thought with a cruel smirk, and leave Thomas enough pieces for dinner...*

But she didn't get enough time to utter another sarcastic remark, because Black was already dragging her off towards the woods. Nicci thrashed furiously, but the man only responded with a savage punch to the side of the face, rendering her dazed.

"You're certainly a dark one, aren't you?" Black growled, throwing her up against a tree and pointing his wand at her. *"Incarcarous!"*

Thick black robes erupted out of thin air and before Nicci could dodge, the ropes twisted themselves around her, binding her securely. She couldn't reach her knife to slice herself free...

Black reached down and grabbed her chin, pulling her close. "My, you are a pretty girl though. I think you and I could come to work together, once you come to a more realistic viewpoint of things..."

Nicci sneered up at him and spat in his face. "Like venison steaks? We can have some if we go back over to the trailer."

Black hit her – hard – across the face, but Nicci was undaunted. She spat the blood from her mouth and glared up at her torturer. "What? You like slapping women around? I've been hit better by your beloved cousin Bellatrix! Come on, you little bastard! You're already starting to bore me! You think you'll get information out of me *this way?*"

"Fucking slut," Black growled, slashing his wand at her. A gag wrapped around her mouth, and Nicci choked on her words. Grabbing a handful of the ropes, he pulled her close again. "You like being slapped around? Well, I always give women what they want..." Curling his hand into a fist, he reached back...

Only to have a single hand grab his fist – a scarred hand, lined with slashes and burn marks.

The hand of a man that Nicci never expected would ever save her life.

With a sickening crunch, the man's hand twisted, and Black howled in pain, clutching his crushed and shattered wrist. Another swift blow to the face laid the dark-haired man out on the dirt.

Fenrir Greyback blew on his knuckles idly as he surveyed his handiwork. "Nasty bit of work, he is. Never liked the bastard, even before he tried to knock me out." The werewolf gave a wry grin to the astounded Nicci. "A pity for him that *Wil-Esarn* werewolves aren't *that* easy to get rid of."

--

Draco swore again and pocketed his cell phone. "She's not answering!" he snarled, turning to where Ginny and Harry were waiting anxiously.

"She answered once," Ginny said, an edge of fear in her voice. "Do you think something happened to her? Do you think she's in trouble?"

"What else could have happened?" Draco snapped, pacing around the dank storage room where they were holed up. The shaft had led down a few floors – clearly it was a hidden escape route that MKT had installed for emergency evacuations – into the room, where dozens of wooden crates filled with potent alcohol obscured the dim light coming from the dirty lamps hanging limply from the ceiling.

"I should have gone with her," Harry muttered, fingering the Elder Wand lightly. According to him, he had simply cast a Shield Charm to hold back the attackers – and given the power used in the spell, Harry guessed that they weren't getting through any time soon.

"Do you think we can help her?"

"Ginny, that's not the priority right now," Draco replied tersely, clearly unused to the burden of responsibility that he was handling. "We need to get out of here, and as soon as that waiter figures out the code, we will be heading back to the hotel before Crouch's men can trace our trail. Meanwhile," he continued sharply, turning to Harry,

“we need to obliterate our tracks. Harry, throw a few crates of liquor on the ground, will you?”

The waiter turned away from the lock to give Draco a shocked and scandalized look. “There are expensive liquors in those crates, sir!”

“Look, I regret the waste of good alcohol as much as anybody,” Draco snapped, “but we do need to get out of here... for all we know, Keith and Twin are both dead, and frankly, in that state, they won’t care too much if I’m using a bit of expensive alcohol to cover our tracks.”

Harry sighed, but threw a few cases filled with bottles on the floor. Despite himself, Draco winced as the bottles shattered, spilling cognac, whisky, gin, and rum onto the floor. *I can smell all of ‘em... what I wouldn’t give just to take a drink...*

“I have the lock, sir!” the waiter announced triumphantly, throwing the door open – only to catch a Killing Curse directly in the chest.

Draco raised his wand, but Harry was faster. Pointing the Elder Wand at the dark figure rusing into the room and brandishing a wand, he bellowed, “*REDUCTO!*”

The blast from the wand was like nothing that Draco had seen before. The bolt, easily the size of a man’s head, streaked directly at the figure, who tried to turn away from the attack – and only managed to lose his wand arm in a haze of charred flesh and boiling blood.

The figure howled with agony, but Draco ignored him, Stunning him with a quick wave. He glanced down at the waiter dead at his feet with more than a little regret. *He served me well... and he didn’t deserve to die like this... hell, I didn’t even know his name...*

“Come on,” Harry said quietly, trying to hold back the catch in his voice. “We need to get out of here.” He entered the narrow hallway, lying flat against the wall. Ginny mimicked his stance, drawing her knife to supplement her wand. Draco followed last, but not before turning his wand towards the alcohol-drenched storage room.

“*Incendio!*”

With a boom, the alcohol ignited into flames. With a last twinge of regret, he slammed the door shut and began to follow Harry and Ginny.

It didn't take them long to find a narrow, iron stairwell, leading straight down – to Draco's eyes, far beneath what he had thought was the base of the building.

"I'll destroy the stairwell once we're at the bottom," Harry whispered, as they began their rapid descent, their shoes clattering on the bare stairs.

"There could be people who are trying get out of here!" Ginny exclaimed with shock. "You'd cut off their escape!"

A door slammed open above them, and Draco heard a hoarse voice bellow, "There they are! Get 'em!"

"Damn," Draco swore, shoving Harry and Ginny even faster down the stairs. "I bet they've probably blocked the main entrance too. We'll need to go to the basement and get out from there. Hopefully the Apparition wards won't extend downwards that far."

Harry was pale. "Do you think that man I hit with the Reductor survived?"

Draco doubted it, but then he realized that the great Harry Potter had never really *killed* anyone before. "Probably... he was only Stunned, after all," he lied. *It'd be better if he doesn't know the truth...*

It came almost like an explosion as the door burst open directly in front of them. Draco and Ginny barely skidded to a halt, their wands angled to curse...

"Draco, damn it, you're alive!" Keith said with relief. "Did you all get out okay?"

Draco scowled and stowed his wand, but Ginny didn't. "What's your favourite drink, K-Crank?" she asked, leveling her wand at him.

“Double shot of Tequila, oranges, no limes,” Keith replied easily with a smirk. “Checking my identity, girl?”

Ginny crossed her arms over her chest. “Just in case. Where’s Twin?”

The gangster lost his smile in a second. “DJ Martyr got DJ River to break the Apparition wards on the top floor. The three got out on Side-Along.”

A look of relief crossed her face. “That’s good. You can typically trust Lee Jordan to do the right thing.”

Harry and Draco were both flabbergasted. *What the hell...* Draco thought, utterly baffled. *Lee Jordan? How could that girl figure it out...*

“How did you...” Draco began weakly.

“Ah, I see,” Harry cut him off, with a smirk. “From Potterwatch, right? I should have noticed it earlier. Nice catch, Ginny.”

“Well, we’ll be a nice catch if we don’t hurry!” Draco said sharply, throwing a glance upward. “They’re after us.”

There was a quick burst of gunfire, and the hammering boots above them suddenly fell silence. A deep voice echoed down the stairwell. “Clear, K-Crank.”

“My bodyguards are good, you know,” Keith said smugly.

“Well, they won’t be able to take out the sheer numbers that have taken this place,” Harry replied tensely. “And what about the Muggle police?”

Keith uncharacteristically winced. “Already here. They’re having a pitched gunfight with the Others outside the building. The main entrance is barricaded.” He spun one of his silver pistols around his finger. “I myself was heading for the basement exit – took the elevator down this far until the Others cut the cord. Barely got out alive.”

Draco swore. "I don't suppose you have an underground passage of some sort that might get us out of here."

The gangster smirked. "Better."

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"You see, it's a part of my culture to own and drive absolutely gorgeous cars," Keith explained with a wide smile at the astonished looks on Harry, Ginny, and Draco's faces.

There were four sleek cars sitting in the dimly lit underground parkade, one that required Keith's fingerprints and voice identification to enter. *Good security for good reason*, Draco thought with awe as he stepped forward.

"Now, you probably don't appreciate the different brands of cars here, but in order in the spaces they are a Lamborghini, Porsche, Corvette, and that truck is a Hummer. We'll be taking that one."

"Why?" Harry asked, frowning. "Looks rather heavy and slow."

"It is... not to mention a bitch with gas mileage," Keith agreed, "but it's got better armor than most of my other vehicles. Come on, get in."

They slid into the black vehicle, Harry and Ginny in the back and Draco in the front with Keith. Draco kept his wand free – he never knew what could happen.

Keith revved the Hummer with a twist of the keys, and almost like a beast, the truck roared to life. Then, with a skidding noise that Draco guessed was probably not good, Keith wrenched the vehicle into reverse, and began gunning it towards the exit.

"Wait, the door –!"

But Draco's exclamation was driven out of him by a shattering boom as Keith drove the hummer directly through the exit door and up the ramp, leaving wood shards in his wake.

“Let me just say one thing,” Harry said, breathing heavily as he tried to calm himself. “K-Crank?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t drive through those – it tends to be detrimental to long life.”

“Not to mention the paint job,” Draco added with a grimace as he noticed the white scratches on the hood of the Hummer.

Keith shrugged as he pulled the Hummer out onto the street. “Car damage can be replaced. Unfortunately, my relationship with the dealership tends to be a bit –”

BOOM.

Draco didn’t even see it coming. He was watching the open road and then his vision went white-hot as something flaming hit the hood of the car. There was a muffled scream, a peculiar whistling noise, and a squeal of skidding tires as Keith tried to keep the Hummer under control.

He couldn’t, given that two of the tires had exploded and his engine had overheated. With an ear-splitting crunch, the Hummer slammed head-on into a lamp post.

There was a screech of agonized metal, and from the bad angle of the post, Draco knew he had no time. Sticking his wand out the window, he bellowed the words of the first spell that came to mind.

“Impedimenta!”

The post froze, and Keith, already coming out of his daze, yanked the truck into reverse and gunned the gas, pulling the Hummer into a small alley, the ruined axels lighting up lines of sparks on the soot-streaked pavement.

Draco let out a deep breath. *That was way too close.* He turned around to the back seat –

Only to see Ginny sprawled across her seat unconscious, blood trickling from her mouth, and an empty place where Harry was supposed to be.

Chapter 14

Garren?"

"Yes, Croaker?"

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did we choose them? Why did we send them?"

"We didn't make the choice –"

"We as good as did, and you know it! We engineered their passing – or rather, you engineered it. What I want to know is why you chose them. Why not his two friends? Why did you send those four? You have to have had a reason – you always have a reason for what you do."

"You know, I thought you would have figured it out by now. By what you've seen, you should have. There's plenty of clear evidence on why I chose those four. And you're right – I could have chosen anybody."

"So then explain yourself, because I don't see it."

"Because with all magic, especially this kind, there must be balance. For everything we gain, we lose something too. For every weight, there is a counterweight. Even more so in magic relating to the River itself."

"I don't see –"

"Croaker, I'm tired of you trying to play stupid. Get your real question out... or is that you don't even need to? I think I already know what your real intentions are."

"Oh, really? How could you know that?"

"You never knew about the book, did you?"

There was an abrupt silence.

"You didn't know."

"We both have secrets – I respected your privacy."

"Not for long you didn't. Croaker, I feel that you must know this, because we stand at the pinnacle. We stand at a narrow bridge, with a yawning chasm on either side. Heaven's on our right, hell's on our left, and the angel of death is behind."

"That's not your quote."

"It's as accurate as any. The point is, I needed to see both worlds before I made my choice. So I stepped into our little planet hell and I approached him."

"You fell off the bridge."

"Well, it would explain some things, but you misinterpreted the metaphor. But that doesn't matter. What matters is... well, you can draw the conclusion as easily as I."

"So you met with the Dark Lord. By all the saints and sinners, Garren, why? Why would you meet with that man? You can barely even call him a man!"

"And it is partially because of me that you can still call him one, but that is not the point. He didn't know me, and he was perplexed about my origins."

"Which you still haven't revealed."

"Of course I haven't. You think she wouldn't note such information, trace me back to the source. I can't afford to jeopardize my only link back, Croaker. I am planning on returning."

"When?"

"It will come; be assured of it."

“So you met with the Dark Lord and... what? You worked with him, obviously. Together, you drafted that book. I must ask you, how much is truly there? How much of your knowledge did you place there? Is it enough?”

“For them to trace our four travelers? Hardly. They’d need a miracle... or help. And unfortunately, they have the second. We can’t interfere much there, though – it’s upstream.”

“You’ll certainly try, though.”

“Of course I will – I’m of an altruistic heart, as you well know.”

“You’re such a liar. So what was in the book?”

“Basic information... well, at least for me it was. You really can’t translate that sort of thing onto paper – it’s intimate knowledge. You understand that as well as I.”

“Of course I do. So you wrote the book with his help – which you never really needed, of course.”

“I certainly did. His was a soul that had travelled between the streams, and had made the current crossing. He arrived at the Torrent like our first sending, and he had very intimate knowledge about what he had faced.”

“So the question remains – will that girl be able to figure out enough to make the journey?”

“If she uses the right sources, gains a knowledge of true Divination, Magical Theory, and Time itself, and is phenomenally lucky... well, it’s a possibility.”

“I hate it when you say it’s a possibility. Then it seems all too likely.”

“That’s because it is.”

“So you wrote the book – how many copies are there?”

“Three, to match the Orbs.”

"But you didn't make those."

"Hardly. I'm not that powerful. Those came from my origin, and even I don't know where they're from. Trust me, there won't be any more oulenkeynes entering the game."

"So we know about the Orbs... who has the books?"

"I kept one, and so did the Dark Lord. The third... well, the Twinned Disciplines weren't the only things stolen during that battle."

"So one of them has the book? Garren, can you honestly trust that they won't do anything...?"

"Rash? Stupid? Reckless? I can hardly trust them. But I can say that they won't endanger the cause seriously. But it's better that they have it than if she has it."

"Why would that matter? From the sounds of it, she already knows everything written there."

"But there is a secret in those books, one I placed there specially, and I can't afford for her to find that."

There was a stunned silence, and then, "Garren, you didn't."

"I had no choice, Croaker! They came to me, and I needed some place to hide them... or more specifically, it."

"Does that mean... you know? You know the date?"

"Of course I know."

"Dear Merlin, Garren, why didn't you tell me?"

"You know the rules of engagement, Garren. You can't know. None of them can... at least until they can see it for themselves."

"Does that mean the Dark Lord knows?"

"Yes."

"You're taking an incredible risk, Garren. What if he tells her?"

"He won't. He doesn't trust her enough, and he knows very well the danger of her knowing the truth. She's more like me than she'll ever admit or realize."

"Or you're more like her."

"That was uncalled for."

"But it was necessary. But you never answered my question, really. You wrote the book, but then you took it with you when you crossed the boundary again."

"I had no choice. I needed something to enable the crossing."

"But at what cost, Garren? Look, I remember when I found you that day. You were in the Hall of Prophecies, which hadn't even been repaired after the Death Eater attack. You were raving, out of your mind. You uttered more prophecies in those few minutes than I doubt any man has every heard in his lifetime."

"I know."

"And that's not the scariest thing."

"You're right. The scariest thing is that I recovered – and I remember them all. Every bit of them. That's what sets prophets above your Seers. A Seer can give prophecies, but cannot remember them? True prophets are far more dangerous, for they remember what they say – and they can work to fulfill the ones they wish."

"So that's why the Dark Lord went to the Hall of Prophecies... he wasn't looking for the prophecy about him. He was looking for you."

"It wasn't a surprise, really. The Dark Lord knew I existed – after all, his spies are quite good. And he also knew that I had given the book to Dumbledore when I was half-mad and delusional. In my right state, I would never have given it to him – but I wasn't exactly in my right state. It was no surprise that the Dark Lord came after me."

"I remember that. We went down to the Department of Mysteries and you started smashing prophecies at random..."

"Not at random, Croaker. A true prophet can recognize what prophecies have significance and which do not. I took the ones that he could have used dangerously and destroyed them. As for you..."

"Don't blame yourself for this. I chose to come with you when the Death Eaters burst in and you activated the oulenkeyne."

"And then she stopped the natural progression and... well, we are here. Stuck in the middle."

"Perhaps the only safe place."

"Don't ever think that. It's one of the most dangerous places you've ever been to."

"You never answered my original question. Why did you choose those four?"

"You still want to know?"

"Of course. For unlike you, I have a conscience, and I want to know exactly why we are ruining these people's lives."

There was a sigh, and then, "Croaker, you have to understand that there must be balance in magic. And that some people embody principles that adhere to the forms."

"What forms? I don't understand –"

"We sent back dipoles, Croaker. In the paradox of their existences comes our salvation. They can make the choices no one else will make... the choices suited to their very souls. We sent back fire and tempestuous fury, the cleansing soul of righteousness. She is still white-hot iron, and will need to be forged into steel, but that's coming."

"And like iron, she'll have to be beaten into shape?"

"I dislike your utilization of my metaphors, Croaker."

"Just answer the damned question, Tisos Garren."

"Unfortunately... this time you're right. The blade must pass through the fire, both the ones she controls and the ones she does not, or else it will break."

"I think I see where you're coming from? And her opposite is... what?"

"Ice. We sent back the dark calculating chill that comes with reflection and a harsh existence."

"Cold always tends to be a part of night."

"But yet in the light of day, it always gleams and releases its true colours. And we have the light."

"Of course. The third one. I can almost understand why you sent him back."

"There must be balance, Croaker. He is near the fulcrum, and his significance cannot be overstated. However, I wish it did not have to be done."

"I can understand that. He's been through enough already."

"Not because of that, but because of what he will face if he wants to retain what he has."

"And the counter to light is..."

"Darkness."

"Ah. So you chose to send her. The one who doesn't exist."

"I didn't want to have to send her, but there must be balance."

"Of course. You know, though, that darkness tends to blot out light."

"But what would it be without the light?"

"I dislike your justifications of evil, Garren."

"Brand it evil all you like, Croaker! I know what you're thinking – what can she give us that those three cannot? Well, here's something you don't know, Croaker: all of them that I sent back are centric, after a fashion. While the other three rise above to become the heroes, she doesn't need to be, because she's not a hero, and she never will be one – or rather, she'll be the hero that is cursed, hated, and hunted. She can be the champion that nobody else will be – she can make the decisions that nobody else has the nerve to make. They might not be the good choices, but they will be the right choices."

"So you took this risk to -"

"Risk it all, I know. I know how truly dangerous she is, believe me. I've watched what she's done, and she is perhaps the most dangerous – and most fragile and damaged – of all of them. That blade would break if it passed through ice water, and she knows it better than anybody. But by surrounding herself in shadows – one could say they are the necessary shadows – she can fulfill the goals that nobody else would even dare to attempt."

"Her breaking is worse than all of the others, isn't it?"

"She is the outcast, Croaker. She knows – even know – what will happen. The outlaw, the vigilante, the one who walks in shadow. She plays the roles of darkness because she walks in night. The others bring the light with them – she walks in the shadows that that light casts."

"So you will destroy her, before the end."

"I do not plan to ruin her. If all goes the way I planned –"

"Which we know it won't, but continue."

"Then she will fulfill her true destiny. And it might be something none of us expect."

"Can she win?"

"The only way we can counter her ineffable blackness is with a tempered shadow of our own – one who knows the night, and who has walked alone. One who has the tools to break her once and for all."

"She will hate you forever for doing this to her, you know. As soon as she finds out, Garren – and mark my words, she will find out – she will hate you."

"I expect it. I'm planned for it."

"Not nearly enough. Like it or not, she walked into darkness of her own accord. You know what she did, and it's a miracle that we got her back at all."

"We have our first dispatch to thank for that. And he has received his reward."

"And a type of heartbreak that he would never have expected."

"There was nothing I could do about that."

"I know. It's not your fault. But as for our little shadow... will she return to the night or will she walk the twilight path?"

"Croaker... I know her type. She will never walk in daylight because of what she's done. She will never walk in night, because of who she is. Her path will always be twilight and shadows, lit by flaming cars and curses. Only when she meets that match will she find salvation...or sweet, merciful death."

"In her case, they're likely to be one and the same."

Chapter 15

He felt himself drift in and out of consciousness, his vision a grey blur, shifting from blinding white light to impenetrable blackness. He could hear voices – familiar voices – but he couldn't understand what they were saying. It was as if they were speaking in a different tongue...

Yet out of the haze, he could discern words, coming from lips he couldn't see. It was almost as if the voice was from an invisible audio speaker, with only faint crackles of static distorting the words...

"Harry Potter..."

He latched onto those words. He knew those words. That was his name, one he had used all of his life. Unlike others...

Gradually, ever so slowly – far too slowly for Harry's convalescing and impatient mind – his senses returned. He smelt a thin odor of charred flesh, but the most powerful scent was that of cleaning supplies, of disinfectants and complete sterility. Harry was strongly reminded of a St. Mungo's recovery room, like those he had visited when he had gone to see the wounded survivors of the Battle of Hogwarts that couldn't fit in the Hospital Wing.

He could hear voices still, but the static seemed to be fading. He could hear the creak of beds and the swish of cheap curtains and the implacable stillness of being watched.

Finally, Harry began to blink the haze away. The grayness faded away, to be replaced by brilliant white walls and two shadowy figures...

Despite his recent inuring to surprises brought upon by near-constant conflict and dramatic reversals, the sight of the two people standing next to his bed caused his mouth to fall open in shock – and terror.

One of them leaned close, her eyes lighting up and a smile breaking onto her face as she noted his newfound alertness. Harry nearly didn't recognize her, but her voice was unmistakable.

‘Hello, Harry Potter,’ Bellatrix Lestrange said with a wide grin. ‘I’m so happy you’re finally awake.’

Harry opened his mouth to scream, but the figure on the other side of him had already turned to face him. Harry felt the air vanish from his lungs as he gazed up in horror.

‘Oh, good, he’s finally awake,’ Barty Crouch Jr. said with a trace of a smile. Harry could only stare at the man in utter horror and confusion. The man standing above him, up close, was *not* the man he remembered seeing in Hogwarts nearly three years earlier. He did look older than when he had been in the Pensieve, but his face was less lined, and his blond hair was much more straight and well-cared for. He lacked the fanatical gleam in his eyes, instead only having a sharpness and cold edginess in his face.

Harry knew that this Crouch would be far more dangerous than the one he had left behind. He opened his mouth to talk, but Bellatrix had already put a hand to his lips. In his hasty retrospect, he wasn’t surprised that he hadn’t recognized her. Her finely crafted features were not wasted and fanatical, gleaming with furious insanity, but were much more... elegant and stately, not consumed by passion. She looked, in Harry’s opinion, much more like her younger sister Narcissa than ever before. *It’s almost as if Bellatrix has never been to Azkaban...*

‘Shh, shh, Harry, you shouldn’t be talking right now. We’ll have time to answer questions later, when the Dark Lord shows up. He’s *very* anxious to meet you.’

If Harry hadn’t been lying in a bed, he would have likely toppled over in sheer surprise. As it was, he only managed to bolt upright – or as much as he could, if he hadn’t had been strapped into the bed with medical restraints.

‘Now, now, Harry, there’s no need to get upset,’ Bellatrix said in a sweet, conciliatory tone. ‘I’m sure the Dark Lord is anxious to meet you too –’

‘Voldemort is *dead!*’ Harry gasped, struggling against the restraints that pressed against his chest and held his wrists against the

bedposts. "His curse rebounded! He *died*! Hell, *you* died too, Bellatrix – I saw the Killing Curse blow through you! And *you* got your soul sucked out by a Dementor, Crouch! And yet... and yet...." Harry slumped back against his bed, shaking wildly. *This is impossible*, he thought. *Utterly impossible. This can't be happening.*

"You can't deny what you see in front of you, Harry," Crouch said with a slightly playful smirk. "We're all *clearly* alive. And so is the Dark Lord – or Voldemort, as you call him. I'm impressed you can say that name – nearly nobody can or will anymore."

"I don't fear him," Harry spat, his muscles clenching. He wished that he could tear himself free from the restraints, but he knew that even Hagrid would have a difficult time breaking free from this bed – especially if the restraints were magical, which he guessed they were. "Where am I, anyway?"

"St. Nathan's Ward Hospital for Psychomagical Afflictions," Crouch replied promptly. "You wouldn't know of it, Harry – the Dark Lord built it specifically in this world, and I doubt St. Mungo's has anything like it. Really, given the amount of mental conditions that seem to plague wizardkind, it always surprises me that your Ministry never created a decent mental institution. St. Mungo's hardly has the tools to deal with maladies of the mind."

Harry was speechless, yet inside, his thoughts were roiling. *Crouch said 'this world', almost as if the time in which I came from is separate from here... almost as if they were from two different worlds... but how is that even possible? Is that the reason why Voldemort, Crouch, and Bellatrix are somehow still alive and functional? Is that the reason why nothing seems to make sense anymore...?*

"Yes," a high cold voice answered his thoughts. "To all of your questions."

Harry looked up and felt the cold fist of terror grip his heart.

Lord Voldemort was standing at the foot of his bed.

He looked different, though, from the monstrous creature that Harry remembered. This Voldemort's features were far less distorted and

burned, still retaining much of Tom Riddle's handsomeness. He was not bald any longer, but instead had a thick mane of sleek black hair that covered his head. And his eyes... they were no longer the blood-red, snake-like slits that Harry remembered. The irises and whites still had traces of scarlet, but Harry could actually discern a human pupil in the sockets.

Despite all of his fear, Harry felt astonishment. It was almost as if Lord Voldemort was far more... human.

"I see my appearance... surprises you, Harry," Voldemort said with a trace of a grin. "I don't look the same way as you remember me, do I?"

Harry swallowed hard. "No, Riddle, you do not."

Bellatrix tensed. "Master, will you stand for that –"

But Voldemort held up a hand, and Bellatrix fell silent instantly. "He is right to be confused and justifiably angry at me, Bella. He has suffered under the threat of my attack for years, and he will view any attempt by me to... discuss the problem... with some degree of hostility."

"*Problem?*" Harry growled, as he felt his muscles tense with raw fury. "*You killed my parents!*"

"That was in a previous life, Harry," Voldemort said softly. "I don't expect you to understand. I regret that more than nearly anything else that has occurred in my existence."

Harry was speechless. When he finally regained his voice, he stammered the question that had immediately risen to the top of his mind. "Who are you, and what have you done with Voldemort?"

Voldemort laughed at this, and Bellatrix joined in as well, their high tones blending together into a sound that Harry found vaguely chilling. Crouch didn't laugh, but there was a wide grin across his face.

"I think," Voldemort said mildly, drawing his wand and conjuring three chairs out of thin air, "that you deserve an explanation, Harry. Now, if I let you out of bed, will you be so kind to sit and talk to me?"

"Where are my friends?" Harry growled.

Voldemort smirked. "Which ones? Your most recent ones... well, I don't know where exactly they are, but I certainly won't be pursuing them any time soon. Your closest friends, however... Weasley and Granger, I am told, their names are... they are still back in your world."

Harry slumped back in his seat. "I don't understand," he said bluntly.

"And I want to explain," Voldemort countered. "Will you act civil if I let you up?"

Harry considered this. The man who had murdered his parents and had spent *years* trying to kill him wanted to sit and *talk* to him. *Whatever has happened in this world, Harry thought savagely, must have been pretty twisted if Voldemort has a sincere desire to talk to me.*

"All right, then, but only if I have my wands," Harry replied, the last words of his sentence almost a challenge.

Crouch turned to Bellatrix, who turned to Voldemort, who seemed to be considering the offer and considering Harry at the same time. Finally, after a few seconds of steely contemplation, Voldemort raised his wand and gave it a brisk wave. The medical restraints burst open, and Harry was able to struggle to a good sitting position. Bellatrix wordlessly handed Harry his wand and the Elder Wand, but not before shooting Voldemort a quick glance of askance, which was returned with a simple nod.

Harry was definitely perplexed now, and very confused. *They are behaving so... civilly. This is not the Voldemort I remember...*

"Now, Harry, do you want a chair?" Voldemort said, conjuring yet another chair out of thin air. "Or tea?"

"I'm not drinking or eating anything you give me," Harry snapped, and Voldemort shrugged.

"Fair enough," Voldemort replied evenly, conjuring a bottle of wine and three goblets out of nowhere and taking his seat. He passed a goblet to both Bellatrix and Crouch, who took deep swallows.

"Excellent, my Lord."

Voldemort scoffed. "Conjured still lacks body, in my opinion, my dear. Still haven't gotten it right."

Harry's eyes were wide. *Voldemort talking openly about wine with his Death Eaters, serving it to them, being so civil... I must be hallucinating, this must be a sick and twisted dream...*

Voldemort openly laughed again. "The one benefit of being a Legilimens," he said with a smirk, "is that you always can find the best things to stun people with. I have obviously surprised you a great deal, Harry. But then again, given the circumstances... there are things you do not know."

"Obviously," Harry replied curtly, sitting down in a chair and leveling the two wands at Voldemort. "I'm not drinking, so start talking."

"Have proper respect for the Dark Lord," Crouch growled.

"It's... understandable, Barty," Voldemort said, eyeing Harry with his dilated eyes. "So what do you want to know?"

Harry took a deep breath. "Why are you so different? What's *wrong* with this world? And why don't you want to kill me? Hell, nobody even seems to know who I am!"

"That's because you don't exist," Voldemort said promptly. "At least, here in this world you do not."

"But I'm the Boy Who Lived! The Chosen One... wait," Harry stopped, his eyes narrowing. "You said I don't exist."

“Not in this world, you don’t.” Voldemort took a deep sip of his wine. “But then again, I wouldn’t expect you to understand that. Frankly, I’m surprised you’ve handled it this well, given our, ah, *last* experience.”

“I’m outnumbered, not stupid,” Harry snapped.

“Glad *something’s* changed,” Bellatrix muttered. Voldemort threw her a sharp gaze, and then turned back to Harry.

“Do you know of the Prophecy, Harry Potter? The one predicting your birth? The one that tied our destinies together?”

Harry swallowed hard. “I do. I heard the whole thing in Dumbledore’s office. You spent most of my fifth year chasing after it.”

“I know, I remember it,” Voldemort agreed with a scowl. “Perhaps that was my biggest mistake.”

“But how can you remember *anything* about your life in... my world?” Harry asked, clearly confused. “They’re, well, separated... at least I think they are...”

Voldemort sighed. “I think I should start from the beginning, instead of using innuendos you wouldn’t understand. Let me first state that when I first heard about the prophecy, back in 1979, it was during the height of a war – and I was winning. I was unstoppable, or so I thought. Looking back, I had developed quite an ego at that point and I believed that the Ministry of Magic and the wizarding world would eventually fall to my might.

“Subsequently, the news of the prophecy was catastrophic. To think that a Seer predicted my death at your hands was infuriating. Now, I overlooked the fact that I never heard the *entire* prophecy – Snape being thrown out before he could hear the whole thing – and I chose to act on incomplete information. A terrible mistake, on my part, which resulted in my... well, we can call it *death*, but it was thirteen years of a very painful existence in a bodiless form. I admitted it to you on the night of my rebirth that I had miscalculated, but what I did *not* do was learn from my mistakes. I chose to hear the entire prophecy, but when even that slipped through my fingers, I did not forsake my search of you. A grave mistake, on my part.

"You see, if I had completely *ignored* the prophecy, I might have had hope. After all, there are thousands of prophecies that go unfulfilled. What made that one so special? But I did not think this. Instead, I acted on the power of suggestion – one of the great powers of prophecy - and chose to bind our destinies together by going after you and your beloved parents."

"You killed them," Harry spat, and Voldemort inclined his head.

"A terrible waste, mind you. But you must think of things from my perspective – after all, I believe you *did* see that scene from my eyes during that escapade in Godric's Hollow. They were the enemies of a cause that I deemed just – I will come back to *that* later – and they had already escaped me three times. My ego, so swollen by that point, simply *demand*ed that I see the deed though – and even then, I offered your mother a chance."

"You still killed her," Harry spat.

"I know, and it only gave you greater protection," Voldemort said softly. "You see my great errors and mistakes, my oversights. Dumbledore was right when he said that love is a very powerful magic – although I would argue that it is not the most powerful. After all, hatred can be just as powerful."

"You've grown humble in your age," Harry remarked sarcastically. "What changed *you* so much?"

"Harry, my mistakes, my oversight, grew greater and greater as time went on. I relied on my Horcruxes far too much, and I chose to ignore the advice of intelligent wizards in my quest for greater power and invincibility. I killed Severus Snape simply because I considered him a blockade to my power – what a mistake *that* was. Through it all, it eventually led to my true death..."

Voldemort looked Harry dead in the eye, and he was stunned by the haunted look on the Dark Lord's features. "Death was everything – and nothing – I expected. Once you past beyond the physical, the spiritual is far more... humbling than I ever realized. And with a maimed soul, it is hardly a pleasant experience. It is extremely difficult to describe the excruciating pain and *shame* that one feels –

it's most comparable to being stripped naked and slashed with a thousand burning cuts, and watching the blood run down your skin as the jeering mob roars their approval. And it was all with the knowledge that / had made those cuts, and that / was responsible.

"And worst of all, it was timeless. It was eternity in the bleakest sense of the word... until I was given another chance."

"How?" Harry whispered.

"Augustus Rookwood, Harry," Voldemort said quietly. "While I had been tracking the Elder Wand, he had been doing research in the Department of Mysteries, and somehow, he found out what the prophecy relating to you and I was. Already destabilized by his stay in Azkaban and his own paranoia, he constructed a machine he called the Time-Twister. I know little to nothing about it – I was never as attentive as I should have been to Rookwood's affair, and I was preoccupied with the search for the Elder Wand and you – but it was similar to the construction of a Time Turner, but on a bigger scale. He could travel greater distances in time – and into the future."

Harry went pale. "And what did he see?"

"The death of all magic, twenty-five years after my passing," Voldemort said softly.

Harry could not stop his hands from shaking. "But we could have changed that, if we knew what was coming..."

"But you wouldn't know *how*, would you?" Voldemort said with a small grin. "In any case, the thought of magic ending destabilized Rookwood's fragile hold on his sanity, and my subsequent death broke that hold. He came to think that he had to change things, somehow erase my passing from this world.

"Through some miracle that even I don't understand, he broke free. He went to the abandoned Department of Mysteries and activated his Time-Twister. He travelled back to September 13th, 1979, a few days before Sybil Trelawney was about to deliver her prophecy. He confronted me and told me of my impending doom and of Snape's

treachery. But before I could find out much more, he died of temporal stresses, caused by his extreme shift in time.”

“Wait a minute... so he *told* you what happened?” Harry asked, growing even more confused. “So obviously you acted...”

“Of course. I ordered Barty and Bellatrix here, who had both been at my headquarters at the time, onto two very special missions. I ordered Barty to kill Sybil Trelawney before she could give the prophecy. I ordered Bellatrix to kill Severus Snape.”

Voldemort sighed. “Unfortunately, by some cruel twist of fate, Snape managed to escape to Hogwarts. He was new to my organization – hadn’t even received the Dark Mark yet – and was already growing disillusioned. The fact that Bellatrix had tried to kill him sealed the deal and shoved him into Dumbledore’s waiting arms. Of course,” Voldemort added with a familiar sneer, “*that* didn’t work out too well, but I will come to that later. Meanwhile, Dumbledore didn’t even realize the significance of his missed meeting with Sybil Trelawney, for she had discovered Barty was chasing her, and had failed to show up to their rendezvous at the Hog’s Head. Finally, at midnight, on September 16th, 1979, Barty managed to strike the Seer down.

“But then something happened, something that Rookwood had warned me about but something I never would have expected... the wizarding world now brands it the Torrent.”

Harry nearly started with recognition – he had heard Lupin say that word. He struggled to keep the recognition off his face. *I can’t let Voldemort know that I met Lupin... they’re likely still enemies...*

“This ‘Torrent’ was a temporal anomaly,” Voldemort continued softly, “one that nobody was prepared for. At the second of Sybil Trelawney’s death, it happened. Every single user of magic in the world seemed to wink out of existence – except for Bellatrix, Crouch, and myself.”

“Why?” Harry blurted. “That doesn’t make sense...”

“Ah, but it *does*, when you think about it,” Voldemort said with a growing smile. “You see, the three of us had *foreknowledge* of how

things were going to turn out should Trelawney give her prophecy. That foreknowledge shielded us from the temporal effects of the Torrent, which was triggered by Trelawney's death – for after all, when a witch or wizard is killed by one with magical foreknowledge, it causes Time itself to shift, to bend into a separate course."

"I don't understand," Harry said bluntly, and Voldemort sighed wearily.

"I didn't understand at first either, so I will try and explain with the same analogy that I learned. Think of Time as a great river, flowing along a channel. When a soul is released into the timeless existence of whatever is beyond death, the sheer power of the soul has enough temporal energy to bend the river. Now, most deaths rarely bend that great river at all, but the death of a Seer at the hands of one who had foreknowledge of one of her prophecies... ah, now there's the paradox.

"A paradox cannot exist in magic, especially one at that level," Barty interjected smoothly. "Trelawney had given a prophecy to predict the Dark Lord's death, but by his foreknowledge, he engineered *her* death. The Dark Lord was acting on a prophecy he *knew* that existed, yet never had the chance to exist."

"The sheer paradox, combined with the massive infusion of soul energy, was enough to 'break' the River of Time into *two* streams," Voldemort finished. "The paradox had to be accommodated. After all, the prophecy *had* to exist – else, why would I have engineered her passing – yet she *had* to die. This paradox had to be resolved, and Time resolved it simply by splitting into two streams – the one you know and the one we are currently in."

"But that doesn't explain the Torrent," Harry said slowly.

"Ah, I'm glad you came back to that. You see, those two streams of Time cannot... the best word, I think here, would be *operate* – on the same level. Logical progression of events influenced by magic had to resume at a later point. Subsequently, all 'magic' *not* tied to Trelawney's death – which would be the three of us – would have to be shifted downstream.

“Now, remember how I said how souls exist on a timeless level? My soul at my passing – which *had* to have happened or else Rookwood would not have been driven to come back – existed within the frameworks of timelessness. Through a colossal effort of willpower, buoyed by my own desire to escape the pain, I forced the remaining shard of my soul, containing all my memories, intellect, and power, into my body in *this* stream of the river, this flow of events. Bellatrix did a similar thing – because, after all, my death was tied to *hers*, for if Molly Weasley *hadn’t* slain her, I would never have pointed my wand at her and compelled *you* to reveal yourself and eventually deflect my curse. Unfortunately for Barty, the Dementor had already destroyed his soul in your world, and he did not gain the wealth of memories and experiences from his previous life during that night.”

“So you’re saying that when you died, your soul travelled to this body and... merged with your soul here?” Harry asked, trying to follow the complicated discussion.

Voldemort nodded. “It was far easier, mind you, for my travelling soul to merge with this one than for Bellatrix’s. After all, I had a maimed soul in both worlds, and such pieces naturally want to rejoin each other. Bellatrix, on the other hand, never created a Horcrux –”

“And I never will,” Bellatrix growled.

“So *her* travelling spirit encountered much more difficulty merging with her soul in this world,” Voldemort finished. “But then the three of us discovered a very unfortunate reality – we were the only magic-users in the *world*, and would be for some period of time. Thankfully, Rookwood was right, and it did only last ten years, but it was ten very strange years, let me tell you that.

“I ordered both Bella and Barty into isolation and protection – I couldn’t have them discovered by Muggles – and told them to do research on any topic of their choice. Each year, we met with each other and discussed our findings.” Voldemort turned to Crouch and Bellatrix. “We discovered some very interesting things, didn’t we?”

“The Dark Lord told us to be creative,” Bella said with a smile. “So I investigated all the types of magic that I never had time to learn about otherwise – blood magic, specifically. The knowledge and

experiences gained from my... other soul... also proved enlightening.”

“I took a bit of a wider focus,” Crouch said, toying with his goblet, “and I also decided to integrate myself a bit into Muggle society. Took a few courses at Oxford, travelled a bit, enjoyed French cuisine...”

Harry was stunned. “But I thought you considered Muggles scum! Why were you trying to mingle with them? Didn’t that run contrary to your ideologies?”

Crouch shrugged. “As far as we knew, we were the only magic-users left in the world, and there’s not much pure-blood culture in just three people. Meanwhile, there were things the Muggles knew that I didn’t, and I wanted answers. So I went out and I learned things, about magic and about Muggles.”

“And what did you do?” Harry demanded, turning back to Voldemort, who only shrugged, a strangely human gesture for the man who Harry had always known as inhuman.

“Most of the time I spent in research. I read extensively and I analyzed parts of my previous life. After all, I now had a wealth of experiences and mistakes to look back upon, and I had no desire to make the same mistakes twice. I also met with the one other person who *did* have magic in the world.”

“But I thought you said... I mean, how could he?”

Voldemort’s eyes narrowed. “He said he was from another world, travelling through time and space with the aid of a magical artifact called an *oulenkeyne*, which I believe was the same artifact that brought you here. Tisos Garren – for that was his name – taught me most of what I now know about time magic and prophecies, for he was indeed a prophet. Not a Seer, but a prophet, for there is a very clear difference. Seers can give prophecies, but they will never remember what they say. Prophets, on the other hand, will remember every word of what they say, and that allows them, if they desire, to act upon their prophecies.”

"It's no surprise that the Ministry of Magic and the International Confederation of Wizards has slaughtered every prophet born in the past three centuries," Crouch growled. "They're incredible dangerous to ordinary society, because, for all intents and purposes, they can direct the path of the future, and since nearly all of them have a powerfully independent spirit, their 'directions' are never beneficial to an organized government."

Harry's mind reeled. "So what did you do with this Tisos Garren? Where is he now?"

Voldemort sighed. "We wrote a book and made three copies of it, discussing the peculiar phenomenon of the dual time streams. He has one copy, I have one, and one was unfortunately stolen a few years ago in a raid."

"Renegade Phoenixes?" Harry asked, regretting the words the second they passed through his lips. *Damn, now he knows I've heard something of the wizarding world!*

Voldemort, surprisingly, dismissed Harry with a wave of his hand. "They were, indeed, responsible, but they are of no threat to me now. As for Garren... well, he left a year after the Torrent ended – and really, I couldn't blame him."

"Why? What happened?"

"Well, think of it this way," Bellatrix said with a cool smile. "You go to bed at night in 1979 and you wake up in 1989. Meanwhile, the Unspeakables go into the Department of Mysteries to find that thousands of prophecies have been smashed, seemingly overnight."

"It was not our doing, Harry," Voldemort assured him. "The prophecies that were destroyed were tied to dates, events, and people who were supposed to act during those ten years. Since they did not –"

"The prophecies broke," Harry finished. "I think I understand. So I surmise it was anarchy, then?"

“Worse,” Voldemort said with a disgusted scowl. “The Ministry of Magic had no idea what was going on – especially when I drafted a very specific letter to the Minister of Magic, Barty’s father, and Albus Dumbledore explaining my new position.”

“Which was?”

“I was going to sue for peace,” Voldemort said coolly. Harry’s mouth fell open. “I had had enough of the pointless combat, and I knew that if things carried on the way they were, witches and wizards were going to die, and why on earth would I want to diminish the presence of magic any more in the world? Ten years of thought and reflection sobered me, Harry, and I curbed my reckless ambition. My new plan was to start a political movement, and with Barty’s new legal knowledge and a few incentives that Bellatrix cooked up, we would take our motions to the Ministry.

“Unfortunately, none of the Ministry officials believed me. When I went myself to the Ministry of Magic, I was forced to flee for my life from a mob of angry Aurors under the command of Barty’s father, who proceeded to seize control of power in the Ministry and impose full martial law. That meant no trials for Death Eaters, the free usage of Unforgivable Curses and the Dark Arts upon targets and suspects, and the usage of any means necessary to bring us in.

“Many of the Death Eaters wanted to fight this, fight fire with fire – particularly the Lestranges and their ilk – but I forced them not to. A heated conflict with Rodolphus drove Bellatrix to divorce him, and given the power of the Black family, she drove him into poverty with the full due process of the Wizengamot, which had grown so disgusted and resentful of Bartimeus Crouch Sr.’s power games that it held the proceedings openly, which led the Ministry to formally dissolve the court and redirect all other legal proceedings to the Ministry itself.”

“Dumbledore would never have stood for that,” Harry said, almost to himself, and to his surprise, he saw Bellatrix nodding with agreement.

“He didn’t stand for anything that was going on with the Ministry, and he still refused to listen to our offers. He resigned all of his positions in government and took up an active role with the Order of the

Phoenix, which was tearing apart at the seams between Ministry supporters and those who resented Crouch's rising power." Bellatrix turned away. "Much like the divisions amongst the Death Eaters."

"After two months of open conflict with the Ministry," Voldemort continued, "I was heartily sick of the charade that they called their government. I ordered all Death Eaters to go on 'holidays' for a year and not to commit any act that could draw them into legal conflicts with the Ministry – not like there *would* be conflicts, just sentences to Azkaban.

"Now, the Ministry didn't expect this. For all intents and purposes, we dropped off the face of the earth. Crouch found that with the trouble dissipating, he was having plenty of difficulty holding onto his power. So after a month of fruitless searching, he turned his anger towards the only possible target – Dumbledore and his followers who were incensed at the Ministry's blatant miscarriage of justice."

Harry made a noise of disgust. "They did the same thing to us, in my fifth year. You dropped off the map, and the Ministry, who didn't believe you were back, attacked us. It's nearly the same thing."

"Except Crouch was in power, instead of Fudge, and he was willing to go much farther than that pompous gasbag ever was. When Dumbledore resisted Crouch's active threats, Hogwarts was placed under siege, and the Order of the Phoenix was hunted. During that time, much to Dumbledore's shock, you *weren't* conceived. You see, there was no prophecy predicting your arrival this time, and quite simply, Lily Evans could never conceive a child with James Potter. But that's a different tale entirely."

"But how could Dumbledore have even known about the possibility of me... well, *existing*?" Harry asked, bewildered.

"He was reading magical signs in the progression of time that indicated that someone of your power would eventually be conceived to bring me down," Voldemort replied softly. "Of course, he was acting on incomplete information – he didn't have the same knowledge of time magic that I did, or of prophecy. In any case, Dumbledore had more than enough problems to deal with – his order was hunted externally, splitting internally, and his school was under

siege. Crouch, meanwhile, was growing even more erratic and dangerous.

“What was the tipping point?” Harry asked, his voice almost a whisper.

“When my father passed a bill stating that Veritaserum, the Cruciatus Curse, and Azkaban sentences could be given to witnesses that refused to testify or give the information that he wanted,” Crouch growled.

Harry’s mouth fell open.

“Quite obviously, scores of witches and wizards were rounded up and imprisoned, many of which had committed no crime at all,” Voldemort said in a low voice. “And at that point, I had had enough. No longer was I content to sit and watch witches and wizards go to Azkaban on the whims of a madman. At that point, blood philosophies lost their relevance – I mean, when Azkaban had to be *expanded* to hold all its prisoners, and magic-users were dying every day from despair, what matter was their blood?”

“But what were *you* doing?” Harry asked, his eyes narrowing. “You can’t tell me you were just doing nothing while your Death Eaters were on ‘holiday.’”

Voldemort’s face took on a deep shadow. “I was trying to reverse my Horcruxes.”

Harry bolted to his feet. “*What?*”

“Sit down, Harry, and don’t act so surprised. By that point, I had realized my error in even creating them – not only did I render my soul horrendously unstable; I also ruined my personal appearance. After all, nobody wants to follow a politician who looks like a monster.”

“So, using my copy of *Secrets of the Darkest Art* – a book originally penned by Merlin himself, who created and reversed the first Horcrux – I began trying to reverse my Horcruxes with the aid of one other... Harry, have you ever heard the name Dorcas Meadows?”

Harry's brow furrowed. "The name sounds familiar... wasn't he a member of the Order of the Phoenix that you killed personally?"

"Indeed," Voldemort said. "He was also the first spy that Dumbledore attempted to plant in my forces. He never really liked Dumbledore, and their disagreements were legendary, but Dorcas agreed to spy for him because he wanted to bring me – who he viewed as a vicious, greedy monster down.

"He gained admittance into my inner circle, and accepted the Dark Mark. He grew to admire my philosophies on justice and magic, and he learned much about time magic. So when I came to him with the offer of aiding me in my quest to reverse the Horcruxes, he quickly accepted."

Voldemort looked up at Harry. "You cannot imagine pain until you reverse a Horcrux, Harry. Rending your soul apart is painful, but repairing it is far worse. And it is not physical pain – it is an affliction of the spirit that makes you want to die to end it, for you are confronted with all of the memories and emotions of the innocent life you snuffed out to render yourself immortal. In the process of creating a Horcrux, you destroy part of that soul to sever your own – but in reversing a Horcrux, you have no such impetus to blunt the pain.

"I managed to reverse all but one of the Horcruxes – the ring that I took from my uncle. The ring set with a mysterious stone that I later identified as the Resurrection Stone, one of the three Hallows that I knew I could never use – one needs an intact soul to harness them, and after all, I had seen Death, and I knew it could never be mastered. Dorcas aided me in this year of reversal, mostly by keeping myself from committing suicide from the incredible suffering. And yet all the while I could never tell him the secret..."

"What secret?" Harry asked, before he could stop himself.

Voldemort fixed Harry with a steely gaze. "That to create one of my Horcruxes – that of Hufflepuff's cup – *I had killed him in my previous life.*"

Harry felt the bile rising in his throat. "Did you ever tell him... that you killed him?"

Voldemort nodded. "I did, and he did something remarkable... he forgave me. He said he had seen the traces of my 'redemption' in my Horcrux reversal. In reality, there was no redemption – there was just the cold cool logic of a man who had seen where a damaged soul would lead him."

"So whatever happened to Meadowes?" Harry asked, strangely interested in this forgiving man.

Voldemort clenched his fist. "After Crouch passed his last measure, I had had enough. I restarted the war against the Ministry, and my first step was turning Azkaban into rubble, freeing all inside. I culled the ranks there of those too traitorous and insane to serve my cause, but the majority followed me – and that gave me quite an army.

"I knew that I needed something, though, to motivate them to remain with me and not drift back to the Ministry, so I began utilizing a little something that Bellatrix found for me in her research into blood magic – a Meta-Transfusion Machine."

Harry frowned. "I've never heard of that."

"That's because I created it," Bellatrix said proudly. "By adapting a few things I discovered from vampire literature and a few artifacts that I found up in Norway, I created a device that could, literally, turn somebody into a pureblood."

Harry's eyes went wide. "That's impossible. There's *no* difference between Muggle-borns and purebloods!"

"Untrue," Voldemort cut him off smoothly, "and Bellatrix has ten years of research to prove it. There is no difference in *power*, but there is a subtle difference. It has something to do with blood genetics, or so Bella tells me, but it means that a pureblood couple is more likely to bear magical children than non-magical ones – and that Muggle-borns are actually simply a product of two recessive genes that some Muggles carry that allow them to produce magical children. We still don't understand all of it, but what matters is that Bella managed to build this device which could transform anybody into a pureblood."

Harry scoffed. "And how did you get anybody to buy *that*? After all, how can most people tell the difference?"

"By publically being the first test subject in the device."

Harry's mouth fell open again. *I'm getting surprised far too much lately*, he thought, trying to muster his words. "B-but that would have meant you admitted y-you were a —"

"Halfblood, yes," Voldemort finished. "It wasn't easy, mind you, but after the pain I had felt in reversing the Horcruxes, admitting that I had been a hypocrite was far easier. And yet," he said with a smile, "the procedure was a spectacular success. After that, people flocked for the chance."

"But why?" Harry asked, bewildered. "Why would they care? You said there was no difference in power... why would they undergo such a trying procedure — which I am assuming it is — for something that appears to be nearly cosmetic unless you're trying to have magical kids?"

"You'd be surprised what people would do, Harry," Voldemort replied with an enigmatic smile. "But back to the explanation...well, suffice to say, the Ministry didn't hesitate to make the procedure completely illegal once they found out."

"Can't say I'm surprised," Harry muttered. "You undermined their power."

"And Dumbledore didn't approve it at all either, let's not forget that," Bellatrix added. "For some reason, he always viewed blood magic as evil..."

"But it wasn't until the Ministry began taking hostages that I made a more active move against them," Voldemort said, an icy note entering his voice. "The next year, Crouch passed a bill that allowed the Ministry to detain anyone without any reason — and that included family members of the Death Eaters and those who had gone public about Bella's new procedure. Noncombatants."

Harry felt a chill – he thought he knew what was coming. “So you went to the Ministry, then.”

“I had no choice, Harry – it was dirty business, but it had to be done. I was not going to watch the wives and children of my loyal servants die because I refused to submit to their tyranny. So I went to the Ministry of Magic that summer with my Death Eaters and we overthrew the government to a man. There were few casualties – most of the Aurors were either attacking or defending Hogwarts – but Crouch was finally laid low.”

Harry turned a meaningful gaze to the blond man sitting next to him, who was not making eye contact with Harry. “So history repeats itself.”

“He threw the first strike this time,” Crouch snarled. “And after what he was going to do... I had no choice.”

“Barty’s actions in that battle are the past, and he wishes that he did not have to dispose of his own father, but as he says, it was necessary. But then I made a mistake,” Voldemort said, clenching his fists. “I thought that with our victory in the Ministry, I could finally sue for peace with Dumbledore. I was prepared to give up the post of Minister to him –”

“He’d never take it,” Harry interrupted.

“I know that now, but I didn’t then. I was even prepared to take on a teaching role at Hogwarts again – Dumbledore knew that I knew more about the Dark Arts and how to fight with and against them than anyone else – after all, I had to deal with Crouch’s fury most often. So I sent Dorcas to Hogwarts to talk to the Headmaster.”

“That didn’t go well,” Bella muttered.

“Of course it didn’t,” Voldemort shot back, now visibly angry. “Dumbledore, by that point, had stopped trusting Dorcas and believed that he was a traitor to me – which he was. Things came to blows... and Dorcas did not walk out of Hogwarts.”

Harry swallowed hard. “H-how did you... *take* that?”

"I was enraged," Voldemort growled, his eyes blazing with remembered fury. "I left England and travelled to Nurmengard, which I broke open with raw magical power. There, at the top of the tower, I met with an interesting Dark wizard..."

"Gellert Grindelwald," Harry finished, disgust rising in his throat. *This* was more like the Voldemort he remembered. "So did you just kill him or did you make a deal with him?"

"I offered him the chance of a rematch with Dumbledore on the battlements of Hogwarts," Voldemort said softly. "And only one person would walk away from that combat. So Grindelwald and I made our plans to attack Hogwarts and bring it into our fold. So, on the date of the ancient celebration of Lughnasadh, in midsummer, we attacked the school.

"By that time, Dumbledore was nearly alone. The Order of the Phoenix was torn apart – I do not know all the details, but only a few stayed to support the old Headmaster in his fight, and *those* ones were so disillusioned that they fled midway through the fight. Dumbledore could barely even muster the students and the teachers to fight – most were so tired of fighting in a three-way war, and besides, why would they want to fight a man who many were proclaiming as a just ruler? What did Dumbledore have to fight against *that*?"

Harry felt distinctly uncomfortable. Almost as if he had already seen the conclusion, he seemed to know what happened at Hogwarts that day. Worst of all, he didn't really know which side he felt deserved the win.

"So who won that fight, the rematch?"

"It was a long combat," Bella whispered, her eyes glimmering with remembered awe at her memories of the fight, "but in the end, Dumbledore toppled off the battlements first. And with that, Hogwarts was ours."

Harry sighed, despite himself. He put his head in his hands and tried to force back the tears brought upon by despair and sheer confusion.

“So you rule now, Voldemort. The wizarding world here in England has been yours for... how long?”

“Fifteen years,” Voldemort said, “but it hasn’t been an easy road. I had to rebuild the government from scratch, taking in mind all of the mistakes I made before and all of the things I needed to consider now. I installed Grindelwald as Headmaster of Hogwarts, where he serves still, after exacting from him a solemn oath not to harm the students or the teachers. Yet there are still plenty of those who resent my rule, even though it is a great improvement to that of the Ministry. And the gang war is not helping.”

Harry’s eyes snapped up. “And whose side are *you* on, in that conflict?”

Voldemort shrugged. “I play the role of the legitimate government, trying to protect my subjects from getting hurt. I don’t trust or work with any of those groups.”

“And what about these Shiy-Mord I keep hearing about?” Harry asked, his eyes narrowing as he began to rise to his feet. “Are they yours?”

Voldemort pursed his thin lips. “They are.”

“Well, what are they?”

The Dark Lord turned to Bellatrix. “You explain, Bella. After all, it’s because of you we have them.”

Bellatrix nodded and turned to Harry. “The Shiy-Mord are a group of individuals that have... unexpected reactions to the Meta-Transfusion Machine. They are among the Dark Lord’s most loyal and devoted servants.”

Harry felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up and a chill run down his spine. *The Ginny in this world is a Shiy-Mord... whatever they really are. I need to get back to her, before she gets killed by someone who mistakes her for a Shiy-Mord, like Lupin did.* “What about the terrorists?” he asked aloud.

Crouch clenched his fist. “Those terrorists, as you heard me say, are nothing more than the scum of the earth. They seek to undermine the Dark Lord’s rule, and they won’t hesitate to massacre people to do so. It is from recent intelligence reports that MKT has terrorist connections, and we *know* that IT does. The Ash-Born are the most dangerous group right now – they’re a splinter group of the Renegade Phoenixes with some of the old members there.”

“And what about the Others?” Harry asked.

Bellatrix exchanged a glance with Crouch. “The Others,” she said slowly, “are what one could call a conglomerate of the nastier elements of society, both wizarding and Muggle, that are greatly displeased with the Dark Lord’s regulations and those of Muggle England, which has had to crack down on security since the terrorist threats against them. The Others are a band of petty thugs with a mysterious contractor that’s been supplying them with plenty of advanced weaponry. Fortunately for us, they hate terrorists almost as much as we do.”

Harry got up and began to pace. “So what now, Voldemort?”

“What now, what?” Voldemort asked, a trace of confusion in his voice.

“Are you going to kill me?”

Voldemort released a deep laugh that echoed in the room. “Harry, haven’t you been listening? The prophecy doesn’t *exist* in this world, so why would I even *want* to kill you?”

“But... you told me so much information...”

“Most of which I felt you were owed anyway, and the rest of which you could have found in a history book,” Voldemort said impatiently. “The point is, I have no direction against your life, and none of my men will harm you in any way if you attempt to leave. What I do want to say is this – you are in grave danger in this world.”

“I thought you said –”

“Not from me,” Voldemort said softly, “but from those who would use you to bring me down. You have heard what I have said, and you may not believe it. You might even think it all a lie. But you must remember this: why would I lie? There are those who *will* lie to try and gain your allegiance, and you must be on guard for them.”

Harry rubbed his jaw. “I understand that. What I *don’t* understand is why you captured me and took me to a mental hospital.”

“Call it a preemptive measure,” Crouch remarked with a bitter laugh. “The Dark Lord didn’t know how you’d react to all this information. You’re certainly handling it far better than he expected.”

Harry was handling it better than he *himself* expected. He was extremely confused, and he was distrustful of what Voldemort had told him, but it seemed logical... almost even true...

“So where are my parents?” Harry asked. “I know they’re alive, but I get the impression something went wrong there.”

Voldemort sighed. “I don’t know all the details. Your mother is currently in a Renegade Phoenix safe house, but I do not know which one. Your father, on the other hand, was engaged in a very busy fight with two other Renegade Phoenixes and one of your other arrivals.”

Harry’s eyes went wide. *Nicci... she must be involved!* “And were you monitoring that fight?” he asked, trying to appear casual.

“Why would I?” Voldemort countered with a disdainful expression. “The Order of the Phoenix split violently into two primary groups – the Renegade Phoenixes and what is now known as the Cyan League. There is some overlap between the two groups, but less and less every day, especially since the Ash-Born have sprung up. Neither of the groups have the strength to topple my government, or the unity.”

“But it still doesn’t explain why you captured me at all,” Harry said, trying to maintain a hold on his impatience and rising temper – he couldn’t understand why Voldemort was still holding him here while his father was fighting for his life. “Why, Voldemort?”

“Because I would like your assistance in a certain matter that you might find... interesting,” Voldemort replied with a smirk. “Remember that tome I told you got stolen by the Renegade Phoenixes a few years ago?”

Harry nodded.

“I would like your aid in retrieving it,” Voldemort said softly. “There are certain pieces of information inside the book I would like to verify – cross-reference it with my own tome. I want to be sure there are no mistakes.”

“What’s this information about?” Harry asked, immediately suspicious.

Voldemort looked grim. “*This* information does not leave this room, do you understand, Harry Potter?”

Harry swallowed at the dark look on Voldemort’s face. “Yes.”

“The two streams of time... the fact that there are two streams is irregular, even dangerous to the fabric of magical space-time as we know it. The fact that there are simultaneous events that contradict each other are an unnatural paradox only enforced by a single separation. These time streams, these broken rivers, want to become one again, and inside that book is the crucial data I need to find that date of reunion.”

Harry’s eyes went wide. “Are you saying that the time streams could merge *back* again? But what would that *do*? Would there be another Torrent?”

“Something worse, I think, and I want to manage and stop the impact, as much as I possibly can,” Voldemort said, rising to his feet. “You, Harry Potter, are uniquely suited for this task as you have a vested interest in keeping your world safe from whatever unforeseen circumstances might come. But I am still willing to offer payment. What do you want? Bella’s procedure?”

“Not in your life,” Harry retorted. “I’m fine the way I am.”

“Fair enough,” Voldemort conceded evenly. “What about if your bank vault was restored? You currently have no actual currency in this world, considering your mother and father never left you anything, as you weren’t even conceived. I can give you enough gold to restore your cache, plus more.”

Harry frowned. “It sounds as if you are willing to give me more than what this job is worth, if I’m going to do it already.”

“If you’re good at something, never do it for free,” Bellatrix said with a smirk. “The Dark Lord’s only fair. So if you don’t want gold, what do you want? Power? Spells? A lady friend?”

“Now, now, dear Bella, don’t give him ideas,” Voldemort remarked with an uncharacteristic smirk and an even more uncharacteristic caress on Bellatrix’s arm.

Harry’s eyes went wide. “Are you t-two... I mean, I shouldn’t even ask...”

“There’s no harm in asking, as long as it’s not for details,” Bellatrix remarked with a chuckle.

“After Bellatrix divorced Rodolphus, and after I reversed my Horcruxes, I regained some of my looks and passion,” Voldemort explained simply, his smirk not leaving his face. “We have been in a relationship of mutual advantage for some time now.”

Harry felt vaguely nauseated – and from the looks of things, so did Crouch.

“I don’t need a... lady friend,” Harry said hurriedly. “The most I’d need to do this job... well, I’d need equipment and backup – I don’t know what I’d be facing.”

“Fair enough,” Crouch said briskly, ignoring Voldemort and Bellatrix completely. “I can get you one of our Wandshot Gauntlets – you saw them used pretty effectively at the club last night – and the Dark Lord can probably give you decent support if you need it.”

“I’ll reassign two Shiy-Mord to work with you,” Voldemort said smoothly. “If you can meet them at Kings’ Cross in two days, they’ll be waiting for you with the details you need. And I will reassign you a new vault as well – I can’t have my agents working underfunded. Crouch, make sure you return him to an area where he can get some rest – he’s going to need it, especially as my agent.”

“I’m not your agent,” Harry snapped sharply, as Crouch took a firm hold of his arm. “I still don’t trust you, and I still need answers. It’s just that... well, most of what you’re said makes sense,” he finished lamely.

“Of course it does,” Voldemort said, his voice abruptly cold. “There are only two things most people want in this world – safety and happiness. Most people can find the second on their own, but it’s the job of a responsible government to find them the first. I simply want to do what’s best for the wizarding population. We are a dying race, but the more life we can bring into it, the better the chance we can thrive. I hope, Harry Potter, that we eventually come to work on the same side... for after all, isn’t holding up the just established order what you want as well?”

“Convince me that it is just, and I’ll answer that question,” Harry said shortly, and with that, Crouch turned away from him and they Disapparated.

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Bellatrix turned to Voldemort. “You told him the truth. A fine performance.”

“I know,” Voldemort said coolly, eyeing the spot where Crouch had just left with Harry. “It’s just a pity it’s not the *whole* truth – it would have been refreshing to be completely honest.”

I saw your confusion, Harry, he thought, and I saw your uncertainty. You want to believe. The fact of the matter is, I want you to believe too. It always tends to make these transitions a little... easier.

Chapter 16

Nicci could barely speak as she beheld the man standing above her, wand in hand, cutting the ropes that Black had tied around her. This is so... surreal, she thought, as Fenrir Greyback slashed the last of the ropes with a quick spell. She noticed, with a bit of surprise, how much cleaner the werewolf seemed, with even teeth and well-trimmed nails. He no longer had the ranginess of feral savagery, but now had the well-muscled build of a trained fighter. His eyes seemed much more human – and by the lines around them, Nicci guessed that the werewolf had seen far more things that no human should ever have to see.

“Ropes cut off any of your circulation?” Greyback asked, his voice surprisingly concerned. Nicci shook her head as she pulled herself up, yanked free the gag, and drew her wand and knife as she surveyed Black’s unconscious body on the ground.

“Can I slit his throat?” Nicci asked casually.

“Black deserves to die in a straight fight,” Greyback replied evenly, his eyes narrowing at Nicci’s casual regard to murder. “He used to have honour – you can’t take that away from him.”

“You aren’t the Fenrir Greyback I remember,” Nicci muttered under her breath. To her astonishment, Greyback nodded with agreement.

“That Greyback is dead, girl. I know my mistakes.”

Nicci could only gape in astonishment. “How...”

Greyback smiled – a genuine smile, not a predator’s – and leaned casually against a tree. “I remember the Battle of Hogwarts, and like many of those there, I died of my injuries there. I remember what I did... the savagery, the murder, the rape...” His voice trailed off with disgust.

“But how can you remember?” Nicci exclaimed, her wand snapping up to point directly at the werewolf. “You died!”

“And that made all the difference,” Greyback replied calmly. “Look, I don’t understand all the magic behind it, but when I died, I came back here - well, back into the past I guess, during the Torrent – and I remembered everything. I knew I had a second chance, and after what the Dark Lord’s bastards did to my family...” His voice trailed off again, and his fists clenched, the well-toned muscles in his arms bulging with rage.

“You’ll have to explain more of this later,” Nicci said curtly, wiping a smear of blood from her mouth. “But we really should get out of here. Now. Do you have a safe-house of some sort that we can get to?”

“You trust me?” Greyback’s voice was incredulous. “That’s quick.”

“I have a wand pointed at your head, and I can tell when people lie to me.” There, let him think I’m a Legillimens. “Now do you have a safe-house I can use? I need to make a few phone calls.”

Greyback eyed her coolly. “You’re a nasty one, you know. You’re taking a huge risk by trusting me.”

“Aren’t you taking the same risk?” Nicci shot back.

“There’s no risk,” Greyback immediately said, to Nicci’s astonishment. “I don’t trust you completely, but I trust Cliff’s magic. He knows what he’s doing, and I overheard what you said to Remus before Black hit me from behind. And besides, it makes sense. You’re from another world... well, I have memories of another world. And so should Remus... well, I guess I don’t know why he hasn’t adjusted to it...”

“Not now, werewolf, we need to leave,” Nicci snapped, her impatience finally pushing her to action. She slid her wand and her knife away and, with a final kick to Black’s head, she stepped over his unconscious body towards Greyback. “Where’s your safe-house, how are we getting there, and how well is it... shit!”

“What’s the problem?”

“My Uzi’s gone!” Nicci retorted, slamming her fist into her palm with frustration. “Damn Potter, forcing me to drop it! I need that thing!”

“You don’t need that sort of weaponry,” Greyback replied, a hint of incredulity in his voice. “It’s just a gun.”

“It’s more than that,” Nicci muttered, more to herself than to anyone else. Despite the fact that her Uzi really was just a hunk of Muggle machinery, she still liked it – it had served her very well in the past few years...

“It’s not safe to go back and get it,” Greyback said, a harsh note in his voice. “Remus has initiated his Twin Discipline, and even if Potter gets out alive, Remus won’t be safe to be around.”

Nicci remembered the feral look and green glow in Remus’ eyes. “How could he transform if it’s not the full moon anyway?”

Greyback turned away. “We raided one of the Dark Lord’s fortresses years ago, and in the chaos, the invaders all stole a little piece of magic we call the Twinned Disciplines. Nasty business... they invoke the power of balanced dualities to create magical effects. Remus’ is particularly nasty – he can choose to make the moon either wax or wane at will, if he gets enraged enough to summon the power – and as a werewolf, that’s not hard.”

“For Lupin, it would be,” Nicci muttered, her mind still on her lost Uzi.

“In your world, maybe, but not here. He’s been through too much hell. Speaking of hell, how by Merlin did you manage to get here? I mean, you look really familiar, but I just can’t bring to mind the specific memory...” Greyback frowned, but before he could think for too long, Nicci cut him off, a surge of panic filling her. If he remembers his last life, he might remember the role I played... I mean, Death Eaters talk, don’t they?

“I’ll tell you more later. Right now, we have to leave. Safe-house, remember?”

“Right,” Greyback said, his tone business-like. “We have numerous ones in London, but most of them have been compromised or soon will be by the Cyan League – meaning Potter and Black can get in there. I’ll take you to Dover – Regulus has a place out on the cliffs that’s well hidden.”

Nicci froze. “Did you just say Regulus? As in Regulus Black?”

“There’s only one, girl,” Greyback replied with a grin.

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“She’s still not picking up,” Draco said tersely, sliding his phone back into his pocket as he turned back to Keith. “She’s either got her phone off –”

“Or she’s been compromised,” Keith finished curtly, drumming his thick fingers on the table. “Given from what you told me of her conversation, I’d be inclined to say the latter.”

Draco turned away from Keith and continued pacing around the dark room. After the crash, Keith had quickly ‘borrowed’ a taxi (keeping the driver at gunpoint) and had taken them to yet another private club that MKT owned. After quietly Obliviating the driver, Draco and Keith had carried an unconscious Ginny inside and waited for more news from Keith’s contacts.

The gangster stood up himself, his fingers toying with the shot glass on the table. “I don’t like that Nicci has not yet called us. From what you’ve told me, she’d be more reliable than this. I’m inclined to think that she’s been busted.”

“But by who?” Draco asked, keeping the anxious twinge out of his voice. Despite the fact that he didn’t like his sister, he had no desire to see her in trouble. And besides, he thought to himself, she knows more about the Muggle world than I ever will, and I can’t discount how valuable that knowledge has been.

Keith only shrugged, a hard look crossing his face. "Possibly the Renegade Phoenixes or the Ash-Born, and hopefully not the Others or his forces," he said darkly. "The last thing we need is Crouch's boss finding out where I am."

"Nicci's been tortured before," Draco replied. "She won't break."

"She might have been tortured from wherever you came from, boy," Keith snapped, "but if the Dark Lord takes her, she's gone. She doesn't stand a chance against the Shiy-Mord."

"I've heard that term too much lately," Draco shot back. "Care to elaborate on what these 'mysterious creatures' are? I mean, that werewolf Lupin mistook Ginny for one of them!"

Keith looked over to where Ginny was sleeping on one of the couches in the finely appointed lounge where they were staying and frowned. "Not hard, really, considering one of the nastiest Shiy-Mord that we know about is named Ginny. In fact, if I didn't know any better, I'd mistake her for one myself."

"You haven't answered my question," Draco said evenly, an edge entering his voice. "What is a Shiy-Mord?"

Keith clenched his fist. "Let's just say this: if a Shiy-Mord finds and takes you, you aren't coming back. Ever. I've lost plenty of people to them, and they cause a lot of panic because you don't ever know who they are. They could be anywhere, be anybody, and they have a reputation for striking when one least expects it."

"Are they... well, human?" Draco felt the words slip out before he could stop them, and he swore under his breath for asking something so stupid. Of course they're human, why else would Lupin mistake Ginny for one?

But to Draco's astonishment, Keith frowned. "Good question. I've never gotten close enough to one to tell, and I never want to. They are his spies and personal servants, and who knows what despicable

things he makes them do for him. But their primary task is to find information – and then eliminate the source.”

“How do they do it?” Draco asked, his voice low.

“Trust me, young man, you don’t want to know,” Keith returned, his eyes hard, his hands clenched tight into fists. “You really don’t.”

There was a tense silence, and then...

Draco felt the vibration first, and with a surge of excitement, he pulled his loudly ringing phone out his pocket. Call display says it’s Nicci... perfect! He thumbed the phone on and awkwardly held it to his ear, but Keith quickly swiped the phone away and pressed the button to activate speaker-phone. He obviously wants to hear this, Draco thought suspiciously.

“Are you there, brother?” Nicci’s tense voice came back over the phone.

“Of course I am, but we have a problem,” Draco replied, chancing a look at Ginny. “Our leading lady has been hurt and the other pretty-boy... well...”

“Where is he?” Nicci asked, her voice abruptly icy. “He better have an explanation for pulling out that kind of firepower –”

“He’s gone,” Draco interrupted, his heart pounding in his chest.

There was a long silence, and then –

“What do you mean, gone?”

“Vanished without a trace, gone.” Draco threw a nervous glance at Keith, who only shrugged with a motion that clearly said your problem, not mine.

“Does she know yet?” Nicci asked.

Draco swallowed hard. “No.” And I’m not looking forward to telling her, he thought, thinking of how livid Ginny would be when she heard that Harry had vanished without a trace, taking the Elder Wand with him. No matter how hard Draco thought about it, he still couldn’t understand how his former archenemy could just vanish like that. It was almost as if he was never even there...

“How bad is she hurt?”

“Not that bad, but she’s still out.”

“Not good at all. We need to be ready to move. My contact is getting me to a safe-house right now.”

Draco exchanged a look with Keith. “Why don’t we just –”

“No, brother! We can’t afford to reconnect right now – my contact and I are on the run, and we can’t afford to lead our pursuers to your location.”

“We need to rendezvous, Nicci!” Draco snarled furiously. “You can’t just abandon us like this! How dare you –”

“I’m not abandoning you, brother, so quit with the melodrama,” Nicci snapped. “I’m going to a safe-house, nothing more. Now listen – you need to find the other pretty-boy, and fast. If he’s gone, we must assume the worst.”

Draco clenched his fist. “What should I tell her?” he asked in a low voice. “She’ll want to know the truth.”

“Well, I guess you can’t give her that now, can you?” Nicci’s snide tone cut across the phone. “Be as honest with her as you dare, brother, but the last thing we need is to lose her along with her boyfriend.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” a toneless voice said from behind Draco.

Oh shit.

Draco spun on his heel to see Ginny sitting up behind him. Her hair was frazzled and hanging all over her face, but her eyes were still visible – and glinted with cold fury.

“Where’s Harry, Nicci?” she growled, getting to her feet, still unsteady from her long unconsciousness. Draco tore his eyes away from the thin trail of blood at the corner of her mouth to look back at the cell phone, gleaming ominously on the table.

“If you can’t hear, Nicci, our leading lady’s up and active.” Let’s see how she handles this. “Care to tell her what you wanted me to tell her?”

“I heard most of it, there’s no need to bother me with the details,” Ginny hissed, her wand suddenly in her hand. Draco threw a quick glance over at Keith, who gave him a terse nod and began to move closer to the furious redhead.

“Ginny,” Draco began in a consoling tone, “when you got knocked out in the accident, Harry somehow vanished...”

“I know that,” Ginny cut him off, her voice deadly. “And I want to find and hurt whoever has him.”

“Ginny, there could be a possibility...” Keith began, his voice sounding almost like his brother’s – not that Draco had heard Kingsley Shacklebolt’s voice much, but the Auror was hard to forget. “There’s a chance that... well, that Harry didn’t...”

Ginny’s wand snapped up, pointing at the gangster’s forehead, an expression more reminiscent of Nicci than ever – certainly not an expression that Draco was comfortable across Ginny’s face.

“Want to keep talking, K-Crank?” Ginny growled. “Just give me a reason, and I swear I will.”

“Ginny, you’re not being rational,” Nicci said calmly. “Just wait and –”

But Ginny's wand had already snapped up. With a single clean hex, the cell phone was blown off the table – and what was left of the table was quivering, smoking shards of wood.

There was a long silence. Keith and Draco exchanged glances again. They knew Ginny would be angry with Harry's disappearance, but they hadn't expected anything like this!

"Well, thanks for that," Draco finally snapped, walking over to where his cell phone was lying, behind a few chairs stacked against the wall. "You're becoming as bad as Harry, you know."

"We're going to go find him," Ginny growled.

"No, we're not," Keith said harshly. "Now put that damned thing away before you blow something more valuable up. Then I want you to sit down, shut up, and listen. And I was under the impression that you were one of the more rational members of the group."

"What about me?" Draco asked indignantly, fingering his cell phone. To his surprise, it only seemed like the battery cover had slid loose, and that the case was relatively intact. The screen wasn't even broken. Hex must have missed... or else this is a damn near indestructible phone.

"Draco, we don't have time for this," Keith said evenly, getting to his feet, a smoldering look in his eyes betraying his anger. "MKT was hit bad tonight – and despite everything that went down, you and your posse were just collateral damage. We were the targets, Draco, not you. And not just from one group – we got hit on two fronts, both from the Others and Crouch's government. Remember that group that smashed in after Crouch ordered mass murder? Yeah, those bastards were the Others. Fortunately, the regular police didn't actually enter the combat, otherwise none of my men would have survived. As it was, the police got in the way enough to severely hinder the escape of my organization, and we lost people I need. My point is this: your little group, Draco, has already caused enough

problems for me, and the last thing I need is to lose any more people in some ill-fated rescue mission for Harry Potter! I can't afford it."

"Then just let us go!" Ginny snarled furiously. "If you don't want us entangled in this mess, we can just leave!"

Keith gave a humorless chuckle at this. "You think it's that easy, Ginny. Guess you haven't heard the recent news, then." Reaching into his breast pocket, he pulled out a thin scrap of paper. "This is a copy of a radio transcript across local networks in London, from Interpol."

Draco swore. Not good. Interpol can track phone calls, trace credit cards... hell, they can shut down all forms of legitimate communications we have!

Ginny took the paper and scanned the text. "How did you get this?"

"I've got an agent with contacts in the radio and TV stations, particularly in the BBC. His job is to pick up any news regarding people being tracked by the police or Interpol, and get it to me before the news is released to the public." He gave Draco a meaningful look. "He's also the one who helped rig up my sound system tonight."

Draco rolled his eyes. Why am I not surprised Lee Jordan is in the thick of all this? And I thought Potterwatch was annoying enough... although this time, it's working in our favour...

"Suspects are all armed and highly dangerous, and police should be contacted if any of these people are spotted..." Ginny looked up from the paper. "How did they get our descriptions so fast? You said the police didn't spot us."

Keith's eyes were shadowed as he sat back down. "What do you know about Barty Crouch?"

I know he was a Death Eater, but you aren't going to hear me say that, Draco thought, nearly glancing at his own Mark. "Not much," he

lied, “although from his little speech, he’s quite the opponent of terrorism.”

“He’s a high-ranking official in both your government and the regular one,” Keith said, rubbing his chin with his thumb. “And if your information’s on Interpol, you can guess who’s running your government right now.”

Draco felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. “He’s not dead, isn’t he?”

“He never died, kid,” the gangster scowled. “Dropped off the face of the earth for a good ten years, but that happened for all of your type. Something called the Torrent. It doesn’t matter now, though, ‘cause he runs this country – or at least your part of it.”

Ginny threw Draco a panicked look, which he returned with irritation. “What? It’s not like I planned this.”

“Did you know?”

Draco gave her an exasperated glare. “How could I, Ginny? I only just got here, remember? I guessed it, but I didn’t know for sure.”

“Well, if Crouch spotted either of you, he probably tagged you on Interpol – he probably branded you as international criminals, simply because you weren’t in his files and he saw you with me,” Keith finished, drumming his fingers lightly on the table.

“Does this have anything to do with that man Crouch was talking to earlier, before his speech?” Ginny asked, frowning slightly as she lowered her wand. Finally, Draco thought with relief.

“What, you mean Ziani?” Keith rubbed his eyes as he thought. “It could have... though I’m not sure. Ziani’s got a reputation of playing both ends against the middle, then playing the middle to the top – and then outsmarting the middle so he winds up on top. I only invited him because he’s a high-ranking smuggler and we have done business in the past.” He smirked. “A pity for him that the Others showed up and

Crouch used that time to make his move – I can bet Ziani wasn't planning on that."

"Do you think he got out alive?"

Keith shrugged. "Damned if I know – he brought enough firepower in to fight his way out, if he had to. But Ziani's not the one who matters here – the point of all of this is that you two, Harry Potter, and that Nicci girl are all on Interpol. No names – lucky you – but descriptions and pictures. Somebody magically hacked our security cameras and stole a shitload of footage of all of you."

Draco snorted. "Figures. So what do you suggest, then?"

"I'd tell you to get out of the country and step on it," Keith said seriously. "Now, I'm showing you this paper because I'm willing to help you. Like it or not, you four got caught in the middle here, and even if you did blow up one of my night clubs – Nicci will have to explain that, not you two – I'm willing to get you out of the country, if only to make this situation less complicated."

Draco's mouth fell open. Keith must really want us out if he's willing to ship us out of England... "So are you going to send us... where?"

"I have contacts in Paris, Rome, Berlin, Algiers, Moscow, Dubai, Beijing, Tokyo, Seoul, New York, Chicago, Detroit, L.A., Miami, Havana, and Mexico City," Keith said evenly. "Take your pick."

"You want to send us halfway around the world?" Draco asked incredulously. "That's... generous."

"This isn't much of an option," Keith replied coolly. "You're getting out of England one way or another. I'd advise getting out of Europe altogether – at least you'll be beyond the Dark Lord's reach, then."

"We aren't leaving until we find Harry and Nicci," Ginny said stubbornly. "Thanks for the offer, Keith, but we can't leave them here, especially if Interpol's after them."

“Well, we can,” Draco said conversationally, “we’d just feel guilty about leaving them to get busted for a short time until we unburden ourselves of such obligations.”

Keith’s eyes narrowed. “This isn’t a game, Draco. Interpol’s got a wizarding branch too, and all of it is under the Dark Lord’s control, at least for England. And they protect victims over criminals here – and you’ve been branded as criminals, not victims.”

Ginny’s eyes flashed. “I told you, we aren’t leaving without Nicci or Harry. They came here with us – they’re leaving with us.”

Keith took a steadying breath. “Young lady, take a bit of advice from your elders here – listen to me, and get the fuck out of the country. I know you’re upset about your friends, but there comes a time where you got to think about the one person who matters here, and that’s yourself. I’m trying to help you, and I can put a few people looking for Harry and Nicci, but my priority is keeping my business running, and not ending up dead or like my brother –”

“Why, what happened to Kingsley?” Ginny asked quickly.

“Never mind,” Keith growled, throwing Ginny a truly dangerous look that made her silent in a second. “My point is that you have to look after who’s important, and trust that the other two will get along on their own. I can get you fake passports and a quick way out of the country, and maybe a bit of cash, but other than that, I don’t have any more obligations here. Are you going to throw away the help I’m trying to give you, or are you going to listen and get out of here while you still can?” He lowered his voice. “I don’t want Shiy-Mord finding either of you – I have bad enough nightmares as it is.”

Draco stared at the Squib gangster for a long time, trying to guess his hidden motive, for there had to be something. But the gangster’s allegiances were as open on his face as those of any born Slytherin – to self-preservation, and to profit. How unlike his brother is he... but then again, he is trying to save our lives. That’s a Gryffindor trait. The Sorting Hat would have had difficulty with this one...

Draco finally shrugged. "Fine. Get us out of here."

Ginny was livid. "Draco, we can't just –"

"You can stay behind, Ginny, if you want, but I'm leaving. I'm sorry, but since we're out of contact with Harry and my beloved sister, we've got no choice." See if she calls my bluff.

Ginny crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm staying, then."

Damn, she called my bluff. "You know, you really don't have a choice."

"Of course I do!"

"Dear Merlin, Ginny, use your head!" Draco snarled. "Potter's gone, damn it! We can't afford to wait for Nicci! How long do you think you'd last in the underground of London? Do you really want to go through what my beloved sister went through?" Another bluff, but this one's got some truth behind it, or at so far as I know from what Nicci keeps mentioning.

Keith threw Draco a penetrating look. "Is that Nicci girl your sister?"

"Yeah, older by about seven years," Draco replied.

"Was she ever involved in criminal activities in Britain at some point?" Keith asked coolly.

Draco clenched his fist. He'll need to know at some point. "Yes."

"I've been involved in the underground here for over two decades," the gangster said smoothly, "and I've never seen her. Care to fill in the details here... the magical details?"

This bastard is too swift for his own good, Draco thought furiously. "We're not from this world. The four of us – Harry, Ginny, Nicci, and I – were all magically transported to this world from another world. Our

world. There are similarities between the two worlds, but differences as well.”

Keith stroked his chin thoughtfully. “You know, after everything I’ve seen tonight, I’m actually inclined to believe you, but it doesn’t change anything, except emphasizing that you should get the hell out of the country.”

Draco understood. If the Dark Lord found out we were from another world, he’d be even more interested in tracking us down and taking us, especially if he somehow knows...

He turned to the furious redhead standing next to him. “What? I had to tell him sometime. From the looks of things, he had nearly figured it out anyways.”

Ginny stiffly nodded with understanding. “I have no problems with that.”

Okay, enough is enough. I need to take charge here. He turned to Keith. “Could you excuse us for a few minutes? In fact, why don’t you check to find out which of your contacts are insane enough to even take us?”

Keith snorted. “Trust me, they’ve seen worse,” he replied, but exited the room anyways. Once the door had clicked shut, Draco magically sealed it and turned to Ginny.

“Now listen Ginny –”

“I know what you’re going to say, and my answer is no.”

“I can’t believe you’re being so stupid about this,” Draco said scornfully. “For a while there I truly thought you were more intelligent.”

“Say what you have to say, then, Malfoy, and we’ll see if my answer changes.” Ginny shrugged and gave him a cool smile. “Which it won’t. This is just an exercise in futility, you know.”

I'm a Malfoy, I can handle my temper. "Look, Weaslette, I know better than anyone the reason why you want to stay. It's not about my beloved sister and it's certainly not about me, it's about your beloved boyfriend –"

"He's not my boyfriend," Ginny growled. "Why won't you believe me?"

"Because your behavior actively contradicts everything that you say," Draco retorted. "And you're a terrible liar – there's no getting around that."

"Except I'm not lying this time," Ginny hissed. "Your intuitive skills must be off, Malfoy, because after he and I broke off things after Snape killed Dumbledore, we never got back together."

"But you obviously still have feelings for him," Draco reasoned sardonically.

Ginny clenched her fist. "I don't see how it's any of your business."

"Look, what do you think your odds of finding Saint Potter are?" Draco asked curtly. "Do you even know where to begin looking for him, especially since Keith has already said that MKT won't help us? Do you really think you'd last alone, a gorgeous young woman walking the streets of London alone?"

Ginny's eyes surprisingly narrowed. "What did you just call me?"

Shit. Shouldn't have said that out loud. "Well, I only speak the truth. You do look drop-dead gorgeous in that outfit, and I already told Potter to keep an eye on you. I said that for a reason, you know. Why do you think Nicci disguised herself as a man while she was working in the criminal underworld? Because she knew well-enough what happens to young women in her career that get caught, and it's not pleasant in the slightest. Ever heard of Selwyn's House of Luck?"

Ginny, despite her anger, cringed. Good, I'm finally getting through to her, Draco thought as he continued talking. "And besides, Keith is

already making a very generous offer to us – tickets out of the country, with no cost to us. Besides being obscenely rude to refuse, why you even want to and put us both out of MKT's good graces?"

"What does this have to do with Harry?" Ginny asked suspiciously. "I can handle the danger."

Draco growled with exasperation and restrained his urge to throttle the stubborn Weasley. "I'm going to give you a little piece of advice, free of charge: you deserve better than Harry Potter. He ditched you so he could go on his little jaunt around England with his true friends to bring the Dark Lord down – if he really cared so much about you, why didn't he take you with him? I mean, that would have made logical sense, wouldn't it? You'd be out of Snape's clutches at Hogwarts, in any case, and we both know you haven't been exactly honest telling him about what really happened at Hogwarts that year."

Ginny flushed scarlet. "You really think I should have told him that I was part of the group that was regularly being tortured and beaten? He probably would have stormed the school if he heard that!"

"Already keeping such secrets?" Draco asked, cocking an eyebrow. "Hmm, that's interesting. I wonder how dear Harry would feel if he heard what you said – that you couldn't even trust him."

Ginny opened her mouth to furiously retort, but Draco continued blithely. "But what am I saying? It's not your fault at all. If somebody didn't trust somebody, it was Potter, not you. After all, if Harry thought that you could defend yourself, that you two could really keep things together while he tried to defeat the Dark Lord, then why did he leave you behind?"

Ginny froze, and Draco fought hard to restrain his smirk as he moved closer, looking into Ginny's furious eyes.

"So I must ask the question, then," Draco said in a low voice, his icy grey eyes meeting her fiery brown. "Are you willing to risk your soul hunting for Harry Potter, who abandoned you, couldn't trust you, and who is potentially not even still living?"

Ginny glared at him for a few seconds, her raw fire battling with his icy demeanor. "You have," she said in a dangerous voice, "no right to try and convince me that Harry's dead or has abandoned me. How dare you? Are you just jealous?"

Draco set his jaw. "I'm trying to keep the remaining members of our groups alive and sane. If you can't acknowledge that, then that's your fault, not mine. I'm leaving, and the only reason I'm trying to get you to come with me is because I have some mistaken sense of responsibility. This is your last chance, Ginny. Forget Potter and save yourself, for Merlin's sake!"

There was a creak of moving wood, and Keith looked in with an exasperated look. "Are you finished yet? I need to know how many flights I'm booking."

Draco turned back to the redhead, and noticed (to his surprise) tears trickling down her cheeks. She's not used to showing weakness like this, especially in front of me. Maybe I pushed too hard...

He swallowed hard, and turned away from Ginny. "I'm going."

"So am I."

Thank God, Draco thought, holding back his sigh of relief. He ignored Keith's suspicious gaze and covered up his own tense expression with a grin. "Well, now that that's settled, I think we should –"

"I need to use your bathroom," Ginny interrupted. "Where is it?"

Keith jerked a thumb towards the hallway behind him, and Ginny slid past him without a word.

The gangster turned back to Draco with a sardonic look. "What did you do, Draco, to convince her?"

"Logic and reason," Draco replied back tiredly. "You should try it sometime."

“She was ready to kill us when I left earlier. Now she looks like she’s ready to kill herself.” Keith tossed up his hands. “What should I believe?”

“Certainly not me,” Draco replied with a wry grin. “But you should know that by now.”

Keith shook his head with disgust. “I’m going to get those flights booked. Any preferences?”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Surprise me.”

Keith snorted with disgust, and closed the door, muttering “blasted wizards” under his breath as he left.

As soon as the latch closed, Draco let out an enormous sigh. He was exhausted, he had had a splitting headache, and he felt more confused and uncertain than he had ever felt in his life. Too many variables...

It seemed like dozens of unique events were colliding with each other, creating a monstrous construct that Draco guessed likely had its roots in the reality of the twisted world he was now stuck in. And without Nicci (her absence was rapidly becoming more of a frustration than a boon), he had become the leader – a role that he resented, especially considering those he was leading despised him. It’s almost ironic that I’m the take-charge leader here, Draco thought wryly as he slumped into a booth in a dark corner. Isn’t that Potter’s job? But – of course – he’s not even here!

He thought of Ginny, likely sobbing in the bathroom, and he felt a pang of guilt for forcing her to acknowledge reality. She was going to get the shock eventually, but I didn’t expect I’d be the one to deliver it! Sure, I didn’t have much of a problem with delivering it – God knows that I’m probably one of the few people with enough nerve to try – but why on earth is it still bothering me?

He thought of Ginny and the first time he saw her with her newly dyed hair and edgy outfit. He thought of her earlier that night, her face hard and confident, with so much passion...

Whoa, easy there, Draco Malfoy. You are not thinking those kinds of thoughts about Ginny Weasley!

But Draco ignored that inner voice, which held his logic and always seemed to sound like the stern tones of his father. Forget blood politics for a second – she’s intelligent, fiery, and hot as hell in her new wardrobe. She’s sexy – hell, even Potter could acknowledge that! I’m just vocal enough to say it. Hell, I could probably sway her away from Potter once she gets over him – or once Potter screws up again, which is bound to happen, given his luck...

You’re treading on dangerous grounds, Draco, his inner logic said icily, and ground that is not safe. Potter will murder you if you even come close to Ginny – he’s already been blatant about that...

A loud ringing noise split the air, and Draco nearly jumped out of his seat. Then he recognized the ring and sighed with exasperation. Damned cell phone... I’m surprised the blasted thing even still works...

He awkwardly thumbed it on and said, “Hello?”

A cold voice came out of the phone, one that sounded rather familiar and that made his hands shake. “So you picked up. About time too – I was beginning to wonder if I could even still contact you.”

“Who is this?”

“I assume you know about our contract.”

Draco’s hands started sweating. “Contract?”

“Don’t play dumb with me! You know the terms – if you don’t fulfill your part of the bargain, I’ll start killing them. Any delay only will prolong their suffering.”

Draco's hands were sweating now. "I don't know what –"

"You can keep lying to yourself, if you dare to risk that road, but realize I have nothing left to lose. Remember our contract, or else you'll suffer." The phone clicked off suddenly, and Draco wildly flicked through the call list on the phone. Sure enough, the number was listed there – but with no name. Obviously, the previous owner of the phone knew the cold-voiced speaker very well – enough to make a bargain involving someone's life.

Draco set down the stolen phone with shaking hands. The voice was haunting him, threatening murder – and from the sounds of the voice, the man on the other end sounded very capable of murder.

Just what I need, he thought, wiping a trace of sweat off his face. Another complication..

Chapter 17

Nicci immediately dropped into a crouch as they approached the cliff. The house – more like a ruin at least to Nicci's eyes – was at the very top of the cliff, and the meandering path crossed perilously close to the yawning edge below.

“Doesn't like visitors much, does he?” she asked wryly, turning to Greyback, who was just ahead of her.

Greyback shook his head. “More like he doesn't want to be surprised. The walk's less dangerous than it looks, but watch out for the Devil's Snare in those bushes. He expects people to overestimate, then underestimate him, and he has more than enough plans for any eventuality. Keep close, though – he does know we're coming, but I'd rather not take any chances.”

“That doesn't sound like the Greyback I heard about,” Nicci asked coolly, following the werewolf's steps.

“The Fenrir Greyback you knew is dead,” the wizard said grimly. “I already told you that.”

“Maybe I don't believe you,” Nicci shot, her eyes glinting with suspicion. “Maybe I just think that's a change I can't believe. Maybe I find it impossible to believe that the former cannibalistic rapist became respectable. Are you prepared for those eventualities?”

“Regulus is the one prepared for everything, not me,” Greyback replied quietly. “I don't expect you to understand...”

“I don't expect to understand either,” Nicci snapped. “I expect an explanation, Greyback, when we get to Regulus. You obviously know there are two worlds – I want to know as much as possible about this one.”

Greyback nimbly stepped over a smooth stone that Nicci immediately spotted as trapped. “No, you don't. It's not the same as the one you left behind.”

“I don’t think you realize who you’re dealing with,” Nicci said icily. “I can handle it, believe me.” I’ve handled more than you’d expect, werewolf. Just try and surprise me.

Making surprisingly good time, they reached the cracked door – which immediately metamorphosed into a black iron door, plating with heavy steel bars.

“Looks more than a prison gate for a high security criminal than anything,” Nicci noted. “Is he a prisoner?”

Greyback rubbed his temple. “I wouldn’t say that... although I would say that he has very good reasons for staying in hiding.” Shaking on a heavy leather glove, the werewolf rapped four times on the door. “Greyback calling.”

There was a clank of a heavy chain, and Nicci heard the sound of at least five locks clicking. Finally, with a rush of steam that made her wonder if the house was pressurized, the door grinded open, revealing a stony dark passage that led – against all logic – directly into the cliff. Without another word, Greyback descended down the passage.

This could be a trap, Nicci’s danger sense screamed, but she ignored it. Drawing her wand and knife (she wasn’t stupid), she followed Greyback closely into the darkness, following the narrow twisting passage, only dimly lit by cheap dangling light bulbs and exposed wires.

The passage twisted and turned and switched back on itself, but Nicci couldn’t see any actual forks in the tunnel. Odd, she thought. Why would this Regulus try and trap intruders in dead ends or in a maze of passages? Unless he’s trying to herd people...

Greyback stopped suddenly and raised his hand. “When I say run, do so,” he growled sharply, “and do not stop until you reach the white door. If you stop even for a second, you will die. Are you ready?”

Nicci nodded.

“Three, two, one... RUN!”

Nicci’s muscles, finely toned from plenty of physical activity, pulsed as she sprang into motion behind the werewolf. Greyback ran fast, but with a loping gate that made his stride seem effortless.

Odd, she thought as they streaked through the tunnels. Nothing seems to have changed...

Suddenly, she heard a very familiar whoosh, and the sound of grinding metal from along the sides of the tunnel. Concealed plates, hidden behind an illusion of stone, were sliding open, revealing thick nozzles – that were spraying thick torrents of liquid flame.

“There!” Greyback roared, his gloved hand pointing at a single battered door at the very end of the tunnel. Nicci could see dozens of doors now, invitingly opening up all along the hellish corridor, all a different colour too...

But in seconds it was all over. She reached the white door right behind Greyback and slammed it shut behind her. And then... nothing.

She was standing – panting actually – in the middle of a small, yet ornately appointed sitting room, filled with luxurious black velvet couches and heavy bookshelves. Nicci was reminded strongly of Malfoy Manor, except for the colour scheme.

But it was the basin in the center of the room that caught her attention. Massive, golden, and filled to the brim with a silvery substance that Nicci immediately recognized as thoughts, it was wide enough for six people to sit in it, and deeper than most cauldrons that Nicci had ever used. Impressive for a Pensieve, she thought, if that’s what it is...

Then a voice came out of the darkness; hoarse, cool, and yet biting, it gave little warmth in the dim room, lit only by a blazing fire in the grate.

“You’re late, Greyback. And you brought company.”

“I told I was going to,” the werewolf said uncomfortably. “She’s with us, Regulus. Not with... the others.”

“Be more specific,” the voice said sharply. “In a country where one of the major criminal organizations is called the Others, you must be more specific. Is she loyal to the Renegade Phoenixes, Cyan League, or to the Ash-Born?”

“None, as of yet,” Nicci spoke up, her tones utterly glacial. “I’m a free agent, and I plan to remain that way.”

The voice chuckled, and out of the darkness, Nicci could see a figure shift in an armchair in the corner. “Well, well, Fenrir, you brought one with spirit to me. A pity they break so fast these days.”

“I don’t break,” Nicci growled. “You have no idea what I’ve been through.”

“She’s not of this world, Regulus,” Greyback said quietly. “She’s from... the old world.”

There was a sharp, raspy inhalation, and then, “Are you sure? She could be lying.”

“Magic slides off her like water, the Dark Lord hasn’t found her yet, and she publically admitted it to Remus and Cliff in a glyph zone of truth.” Greyback crossed his arms over his chest. “And you know better than I do who she resembles. She’s a walking impossibility – unless she was from another world.”

The shadow shifted again. “Remus activated his Twin Discipline tonight. I could feel it.”

“It’s the only reason the two of us are still alive – although I can’t say the same for a group of assorted thugs that your brother and Potter

brought to get us,” Greyback growled. “This girl ripped through them like water, and they were trained.”

“Not well enough,” the voice said coolly, with a hint of smugness. “We both know that the Cyan League neglects – to their peril – good combat training. She killed them?”

“I’m standing right here, thank you very much,” Nicci said roughly. “Unlike you, apparently. Why don’t you come out so we can see you?”

There was a rustle of robes, and the shadow seemed to move closer, into the flickering light...

To reveal the grim, horribly scarred visage of Regulus Black.

Nicci restrained her gasp of disgust, but it was a near thing. Nearly every inch of the wizard’s face was either creased with deep jagged scars or seared badly. His thick black hair, so much like his brother’s, was patchy over a discoloured and cracked scalp, and was even graying in sections. But his eyes were still dark and keen, and his wand was still angled at both of them.

“My appearance disgusts you, I can tell,” Regulus Black sneered, crossing his arms across his chest and folding his hands into his voluminous black sleeves. “You see why I don’t go outside. I don’t need pity.”

“You need several years of plastic surgery and a good gallon of healing potion,” Nicci said coolly. “What the hell happened to you, Regulus Black? Did the Dark Lord throw you into a meat grinder and then set you on fire?”

“You’re actually close,” the wizard sneered. “Ever fight your way out of a lake of Inferi only to be engulfed in Fiendfyre a few days later?”

“Can’t say I have,” Nicci replied. “Nor would I ever want to. That doesn’t explain the scarring...”

“You can’t heal Fiendfyre burns, girl,” Greyback said quietly. “And combined with the poisons naturally inherent in Inferi flesh and claws, they leave some pretty nasty marks.”

Nicci swallowed hard, but then gave Regulus a steely look. “Does it still hurt?”

“Every day of my life,” Regulus returned.

Nicci clenched her fist as the younger, scarred Black turned to Greyback.

“You were right when you called her a walking impossibility. She looks just like if someone crossed that poor Malfoy girl with...” His voice trailed off as his wand snapped up. “What’s your name, girl?”

“Nicci.”

“Full name, and don’t lie. Unlike you, I’m a Legilimens, and a good one.” Regulus’ scarred knuckles were visibly white. “Well?”

Nicci swore under her breath, but she knew that this was inevitable. At least I didn’t break it in front of Potter or the other Black. “My name is Nicci Tara Snape.”

Both wizards froze, and exchanged glances. “Repeat that,” Greyback ordered sharply, trying to keep the astonishment out of his voice.

“My name is Nicci Tara Snape,” Nicci repeated. “I’m not surprised if neither of you know of me... well, Greyback might have heard to me in his last life. I was the one who got luhix into England.”

Greyback’s eyes narrowed as he thought. “I don’t remember a lot from then, but I do remember luhix. We have it in this world too, you know... and it’s rampant in England right now.”

Just bloody perfect. I nearly got myself killed getting rid of that damned stuff, and now its back. Wonderful. “Remember me, then, Greyback?”

The werewolf thought for a few more seconds before shrugging. "Not really. It doesn't matter much. I didn't know that Severus had a daughter in that world, though."

Nicci flushed with embarrassment. Why do people assume that? she thought. "I'm... not Severus' daughter. I'm his sister, younger by about twelve years. Bastard daughter, raised by foster parents, went dark for a good seven years. You know, the usual sob story."

"Nothing about that story is ordinary," Regulus said evenly before turning back to Greyback. "How much did you tell her?"

"Barely anything, but is she... well, I mean, should we tell Severus? He should probably –"

"Wait a second – Severus is alive?" Nicci asked, her eyes widening with shock – and pleasure. "Where is he? What's he doing?"

Greyback and Regulus exchanged pointed glances. "It's... well, it's complicated," Greyback began.

"It's a living hell to explain, especially to one who doesn't know the context," Regulus said bitingly. "Severus would have a better time explaining it to her, not us."

"But would he even listen to her?" Greyback asked. "You know what he's been through... is he even still, well, rational enough to work with us?"

"You tell me," Regulus snapped, turning towards the darkness. "You know better than I do, Fenrir."

A log split in the fireplace as Nicci looked at Greyback and Regulus, her frustrated expression betraying her confusion. Someone better start breaking me news about what's going on around here, or I'm going to start breaking heads.

Finally, Regulus shifted back towards Nicci, his eyes penetrating. "Does Fenrir resemble the one you recognized in your world?"

Nicci swallowed hard despite herself – it was almost as if the wizard had read her mind. Probably did... damned Legilimens. "No, and you know it."

"Want to know why?"

"That's for me to tell, Black, not you," Greyback growled, a dangerous look moving into his eyes. "There are boundaries you don't cross, and that's one of them."

"Wil-Esarn, you owe her the truth," Regulus replied angrily.

"I owe this girl nothing, no matter what her lineage is," Greyback returned dangerously. "If I choose to tell her, it's my choice, not yours."

"Look, I don't mean to sound stupid," Nicci burst out, her frustration with the two wizards reaching a new high, "but what the hell is a Wil-Esarn? People keep using terms here that I don't know, and none of them are in Latin."

"It's in a lost language, and it translates roughly to 'wild master', although that's only part of the real meaning," Regulus explained with irritation. "I bet Greyback here could give you a better definition, though. They were created to fight against the Dark Lord, particularly in his overseas projects, and he's got a lot of those."

That's not like him, Nicci thought with interest, storing the information in the back of her mind. The Dark Lord must have changed... or gotten much more ambitious...

"The Wil-Esarn can control nature to a degree, but there's a price," Greyback said, his grim tones drawing Nicci's attention like a magnet. A haunted look crossed through the werewolf's eyes. "The only thing that can draw a Wil-Esarn's power is emotion on a higher level – that is, emotions that are tied to human experience. Primal feelings, like

pure physical pain, can't trigger the magic. You need to harness memories or feelings that are intrinsically connected to humanity – grief, love, controlled fury, the list goes on. Our power is the tie that keeps us human as we call upon the wild... but once you draw power from a memory, you never forget it. It becomes a part of you..."

"And werewolves, who battle between humanity and bestiality every day, are often best-equipped to become Wil-Esarn. Centaurs and half-giants too, and even vampires would do well, if we could ever steer them away from the Dark Lord's projects long enough," Regulus finished. "Greyback here is one of the best Wil-Esarn we have."

"It's not because I wanted this, Black," Greyback growled. "This is not what I wanted, and if they hadn't been..." The werewolf's voice trailed off as he stared into the silvery pool in the center of the room.

Nicci clenched her hand into a fist. "When can I see Severus?"

"Why do you care so much?" Regulus asked, an amused expression crossing his face. "I thought you wanted to hear Greyback's story. I'm sure he'd love to tell it..."

"Regulus," Greyback growled, his warning very clear now.

Regulus snorted with disgust. "I thought you would have gotten over this by now."

"You don't just get over losing your entire family!" Greyback roared, his eyes blazing with fury. "Did you just get over what Sirius did to you? Did Remus just get over Rachel Shender after she ditched him for Potter? Did Lily just get over what Potter tried to do to her –"

"Fenrir, that enough," Regulus said curtly, with an air of finality in his tone that brooked no argument.

"Who's Rachel Shender?" Nicci asked, frowning at the unfamiliar name.

“Severus’ll will explain that,” Regulus hastily said. “It’s more his story to tell, anyways... not like he’ll want to tell it...”

“And why should he want to, Regulus?” Greyback asked furiously. “It’s not exactly a pleasant story from his perspective, and he shouldn’t be forced to tell it if he doesn’t want to.” The emphasis on his final words made his implication clear. “Besides, it’s not like this girl would understand –”

“Don’t assume anything,” Nicci snapped icily. “I lost my family too. Maybe not Severus, but my foster parents were killed, and... and...” She swallowed hard. “You really don’t want to know the rest. Suffice to say, I’ve likely been through the same though you have, Greyback.”

“Did you take your revenge?” the werewolf asked, his eyes blazing with a contained fury.

Nicci closed her eyes against the memories and successfully forced them back. She nodded.

“Was it worth it?”

Nicci couldn’t answer that. Indeed, she didn’t regret to this day the things she did to the bastards that had killed her foster parents. But she also knew that she could never do them again – and she also knew what those things had done to her, as much as they had been done to them. I still think they were worth it... although Severus would probably tell me otherwise, considering how they relate to that damned Unbreakable Vow I took... probably because they were the reasons why I took the Vow in the first place...

“Well?” Greyback asked roughly. “Was it worth it?”

Nicci closed her eyes. “Not all of the repercussions have been felt yet.”

There was a long silence, finally broken when Regulus turned towards the golden basin and drew his wand.

“What are you doing, Regulus?” Greyback asked sharply.

“If this one is going to survive in our world, she needs to know something about it,” Regulus replied curtly. “And I want her to show me what she knows. Have you ever used a Pensieve before, girl?”

“I know how they work, but I’ve never used one,” Nicci replied warily. “Is that what that basin is?”

“No,” Regulus replied. “But it’s similar. When one immerses him or herself in this basin, one can share memories with observers. It is a useful tool for a Legilimens, for he can fillet through unnecessary memories of the subject in the basin with much more skill and precision.” He stretched out his hand towards the basin. “Care to submerge?”

“Not in your life,” Nicci said coolly. “I don’t trust you nearly enough to get in there.”

“Good answer,” Greyback muttered. When the scarred wizard threw the werewolf a baleful look, Greyback only shrugged. “What? She’s doing what I’d do in her situation.”

“Thanks for the support, Fenrir,” Regulus snapped.

“Pleasure’s all mine.”

Regulus opened his mouth to deliver an angry retort, but he froze as a tinny whistle broke through the air. To Nicci, it sounded like someone scraping their nails on a chalkboard, and she winced involuntarily.

“Someone’s coming up the path and preparing to directly Apparate in,” Regulus said, more to himself than to anyone. “From the feel of the magical frequency, it’s Remus.”

So the werewolf did get out all right, Nicci thought to herself. Now Regulus just has to convince me whether that’s a good thing or not.

“Is he being followed?” Greyback asked tensely.

“Not at the moment, but he’s taking a big risk directly Apparating in here,” Regulus replied, prodding the silvery substance in the basin vigorously. Out of the basin rose a hazy image of Lupin, his clothes ragged and torn, with several nasty gouges across his arms, as if a horn had shredded through his skin.

“Prongs,” Regulus growled, his eyes blazing. “He’s plainly stated his allegiance.”

“As has your brother, Regulus,” Greyback said, a harsh note in his voice. “He knocked me out and was going to... well, he was going to do something to Nicci before I returned his favour.”

Regulus seemed not to be taking this particularly well, but he controlled his rage before Nicci could make a scathing remark. Pity, I would have liked to see this little Legilimens chopped down a bit...

“Are you going to let him in?” Greyback asked. “Better move soon, or else the Dark Lord will track him through your wards.”

Regulus didn’t reply, only giving his wand a quick wave.

A second later, there was a loud crack, and Remus Lupin appeared – right in the middle of the golden basin.

Regulus wasted no time. Stabbing his wand deeply into the silvery substance, he chanted words in a rasping language that Nicci couldn’t even recognize. The werewolf in the pool began to howl in pain.

“Is your name Remus John Lupin?” Regulus roared.

“Yes!” Lupin screamed. “Let me out, damn it!”

Regulus withdrew his wand, and Lupin, shuddering with remembered pain, struggled out the basin, swearing all the while.

“And you wondered why I didn’t want to go in there,” Nicci said conversationally. “Not gonna happen, Black. I’m no masochist.”

Lupin saw Nicci then, and gave a strange sigh, filled with relief and disgust. “So you’re here, now.”

“As am I,” Greyback said, shouldering his way forward to grip Lupin in a tight embrace. “Damn it, Remus, stop trying to get yourself killed! One of these days it’s gonna happen.”

“It’s a habit,” Lupin replied tiredly, breaking out of Greyback’s embrace to glare at Nicci, who was chuckling to herself. “Although from the looks of things, our little friend here has the same habit.”

Nicci stopped laughing suddenly, and her eyes narrowed. “Where’s that black guy who was with you? Where’s Thomas?”

“Cliff got away in the confusion of the fighting,” Lupin replied, wiping a smear of blood from a nasty gouge under his chin. “Hand me some dittany, will you, Regulus?”

“You know I’m allergic to that stuff, Remus,” Regulus said nastily. “It’s not like I’m going to keep it around the house.”

“I forgot, okay?” Remus snarled, shaking the fresh blood off his hands. “I’ve had a busy night.”

“I hope you were busy enough to rip Potter to shreds,” Nicci said with a smirk. “So? Did you?”

Lupin swallowed hard, an expression of mingled disappointment, rage, and frustration crossing his face. “No, I didn’t. He got away in the fight when that damned truck you tipped actually collapsed.”

Nicci whistled. “Must have been pretty beaten up, to break with just one tire down.”

“Well, by the time Potter was finished, there was just one tire left intact,” Lupin replied coldly. “Apparently you got back all right.”

“No need to be sarcastic, I am grateful to Greyback for getting me out of Black’s clutches,” Nicci replied.

“You’re welcome,” Greyback remarked sarcastically.

“In any case, have you attempted to contact any of your party?” Lupin pursued. “Do you have any news?”

Nicci clenched her fist. “Not good. From the impression I got, MKT got hit on two fronts, and got hit bad. And from what I heard, one of my comrades is gone.”

Lupin froze. “What do you mean, gone? Vanished? Dead? And which one, the blonde, the redhead that looks like a Shiy-Mord, or that boy claiming to be James’ son?”

“What?” Regulus asked incredulously, his attention all on Lupin now. “You mean that it’s not Darren John Potter, but a different boy?”

Who the hell is ‘Darren John Potter? Nicci thought to herself. Unless...

“I know that arrogant bastard as well as anyone, it’s not Darren Potter,” Lupin growled. “No, this kid is called Harry James Potter, and he claims to be James’ son – by Lily.”

“Well, then he’s lying,” Regulus answered promptly. “James couldn’t conceive with Lily – that was the entire reason he had that affair with Rachel Shender and divorced Lily.”

Nicci could barely believe her ears. No way... this is so twisted... “The Potter boy came with me, from my world.”

All three of them exchanged glances – very panicked glances.

“And you’re saying this kid is gone?” Regulus asked incredulously. “Why the hell did you abandon him?”

“I didn’t just abandon him – I figured the pretty-boy could take care of himself,” Nicci snapped. “I wasn’t counting on him vanishing.”

“This is bad,” Lupin said, very real panic on his face now. “This is very bad. The Dark Lord’s got him.”

“We don’t know that,” Greyback growled, although there was still fear in the werewolf’s voice. “Until we have proof of where he is...”

“We won’t get proof until it’s too late, Fenrir, you know that better than anyone!” Regulus snarled. “Things are moving too fast. We need more information, and we need it fast. And you can bet the Dark Lord, if he’s aware of your presence, Nicci, will be searching for the same thing. And his methods of obtaining information are brutal and final.”

“Shiy-Mord,” Greyback growled. “Filthy bitches.”

“But what information do we need?” Lupin asked with frustration. “We’ve been through this before – what’s our next step. We’re at a bloody stalemate with the Cyan League, and we don’t have enough serious firepower to take down any of the overseas ops. Meanwhile, the Dark Lord’s forces get stronger and stronger, while ours continue to fragment and polarize! What are we supposed to do next?”

“We need to get all the Renegade Phoenixes together as one cohesive force,” Regulus said firmly, beginning to pace around the golden basin. “That’s Peter, Gilderoy, Lily, Kingsley, Severus, and possibly a few of our agents overseas if we can get them. We need to have a united front. That’s what I’ve been telling you for years!”

“And what about Potter, then?” Lupin asked furiously. “If this Harry boy really is the one who should have been born eighteen years ago, he could have incredible value. We can’t afford to lose him to the Dark Lord? Don’t you agree, Nicci?”

Nicci simply shrugged. "I just want to get back to my own world, and I wouldn't mind being reunited with my protégé and my good-for-nothing brother – although it would be good to see Severus again," she added wistfully.

Regulus, Lupin, and Greyback all exchanged glances. "He won't be the same man you remembered, girl," Greyback said roughly. "He's been through a very different hell here than in the old world."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, in the old world, he lost everything," Regulus said conversationally. "From what Greyback told me, he threw everything away and then later regretted it. In this world he was given a second chance, and he took it gladly... and then one could say that his enemies conspired to ruin him all over again."

Nicci clenched her fist. "So you're saying the Death Eaters have a hold on him here too –"

But Regulus was already snidely laughing. "Death Eaters? Death Eaters? Think of whom Severus' real enemies are, Miss Snape. The Dark Lord has done little to match the damage dealt by Sirius Black and James Potter."

Nicci felt a chill. "And from the sounds of it, Severus wasn't the only one who got hit."

She threw a glance at Lupin, whose eyes smoldered with fury.

"None of this is relevant," Greyback said curtly. "We need to reunite the Renegade Phoenixes, and if we meet up with Severus along the way, so be it. But that also means we have to consider that little poisonous offshoot that we have."

"Ash-Born," Lupin growled, throwing Regulus a disgusted look. The scarred wizard only held up his hands.

"You know I wouldn't join them. I'm not that stupid."

“But who was it that gave the leader the impetus to start the group?” Lupin snarled. “I know your magic well enough to recognize its traces when I see them. If you didn’t give them their powers, you certainly helped the leader find them.”

“And if I did?” Regulus retorted, clearly angry now.

“Then I would have no qualms of accusing you of aiding the real terrorists in England!” Lupin snarled.

“I did what had to be done, Lupin, and you can’t deny that,” Regulus snapped. “You still don’t get it, do you? War is hell, and this is war, what we’re in. We sometimes have to use weapons that we find reprehensible and disgusting, even evil, but we have no choice. We know the Dark Lord would do the same – hell, he has done the same.”

“There is a difference between what is right and what is easy, Regulus,” Lupin said quietly. “A pity you forget that so often.”

Regulus snorted. “Rightness? Think about what you’re saying, Remus Lupin! This is war, not some philosophical debate. War isn’t about whose right or whose wrong – war is about killing as many of the enemy before they kill you! You can’t win wars – especially not this one – only lose less. The Ash-Born know this, and are willing to fight for us if we unite.”

“I won’t ally with terrorists, Black,” Lupin snarled.

“And you know I won’t, either,” Greyback added unexpectedly. At the surprised look from Nicci, the werewolf only shrugged. “It’s a personal matter between me and the leader of that group, nothing more. I won’t support them and I will not fight if they are there.”

Regulus was fuming. “We are throwing away valuable firepower here if we exclude that group, you know that?”

“But taking that power would cost us our souls,” Lupin replied evenly. “You know that, Regulus.”

There was a long silence, and then Greyback looked at Nicci, who had remained quiet throughout the entire argument. “Do you have anything to say here?” the werewolf asked roughly.

Nicci shrugged. “All I want is to be able to see Severus and talk to him. If he’s like Greyback and remembers something of the... of the old world, then maybe he could help get me and the rest back there. It’s not like I stand to make huge profits here with no bank vault and little resources or information. It’s only pragmatic.”

Regulus nodded, as if he were expecting nothing more or less, but Lupin still looked mutinous.

“Oh, would you stop being such a baby, Remus?” Regulus finally scoffed. “Have some backbone! I know that we have little time, but the fact that we have that additional constraint means we have to use all the resources we have!”

“I won’t associate with terrorists,” Lupin said flatly, “and that’s final. But,” he added, just before Regulus threw up his hands with exasperation, “I will help the cause. We need information – well, I can get it. And Nicci here should come with me; she deserves the truth as much as any of us, especially if she’s going to be helping us.”

“Don’t put words in my mouth, Lupin, I haven’t agreed to that,” Nicci said sharply.

“You want to find Potter, don’t you?” Lupin shot back. “Well, so do I. You have to cooperate with me if you want to have any hope in finding him and the rest of your group.”

Nicci thought about this for a second. Honestly, I really don’t need any of them... For all intents and purposes, I’m free to do whatever the hell I want. I have no obligations, no ties... the only people I might owe anything to are the three who came with me, and once we have them, we can work on finding our way out of here.

“I want to find those who came with me – and that includes Potter – and then we’re going to leave,” Nicci said finally, steel in her voice. “No commitments, no obligations.”

Regulus gave an exasperated sigh. “Fine. Remus, since you’re the only one who really cares about the Potter boy, you can work with Nicci and hunt for him. Fenrir and I will work on bringing together the Renegade Phoenixes. We’ll contact you when we get them together – except for Severus. You can take your precious friend Nicci to him – I’m not dealing with that explosion.”

Nicci threw Lupin a questioning look, but the wizard only returned her glance with scorn. “And as for you... well, perhaps my judgments were incorrect. Perhaps there isn’t as much there as I thought.”

Nicci cocked an eyebrow. “And what did you ever think was beneath the surface, Black? What were you expecting?”

“Something else,” the scarred wizard returned, a raw edge of disappointment in his voice. “You disgust me, you know? You just don’t care about anything, do you? Nothing to live for... no purpose.”

Nicci opened her mouth to furiously protest, but Regulus only shook his head as he turned to a shocked Lupin. “Make her care about something, Remus, if you can get anything good out of this mess.”

Nicci finally found her voice. “Who do you think you are, Black, to make judgments about me? Do you have any idea what I’ve been through?”

“Do you have any idea how little I care?” Regulus snarled, his hollowed eyes blazing with fury. “You’re never going to be anything more than the hired filth I pick out from beneath my boots. You call yourself Severus’ sister? Make yourself worthy of him, and then you can bear that appellation.”

And with that, Regulus swept from the room, leaving an astonished (and furious) Nicci standing behind him. Lupin wore a mingled

expression of pity and frustration, while Greyback's expression was unreadable.

"I'll handle him, Remus," Greyback finally said, his eyes shadowed.

"Good luck."

"I know – I'll need it," Greyback replied grimly.

When the werewolf had left the room, Lupin turned to Nicci, who was still silently fuming. "Well, are you ready?"

"For what?" Nicci spat.

Lupin approached the side of the golden basin and tapped the silvery substance within with his wand. It began frothing very fast, almost as if someone had lit a raging fire beneath it. "We're going to look for your mysterious friend Harry Potter, but first you're going to see how our world fell into the mess it is now, and maybe – just maybe – you'll understand why Regulus hates you so much."

"What did I do to him?" Nicci snarled, drawing her own wand cautiously.

"You exist here, and you are tied to Severus in a way that Regulus will never be," Lupin replied, a bitter edge in his voice. "One could even say he's jealous... though he does have a point."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Nicci asked furiously.

"Exactly what he said," Lupin replied. "Now step in the basin."

"Where are we going?"

"To the night before the Torrent – my memories. The night when everything went to hell."

Chapter 18

"I can't believe I'm doing this," Nicci muttered to herself as moved towards the basin and prodded the silvery substance with her wand. "It's... weird."

Lupin rolled his eyes. "Never used a Pensieve before?"

"You think I had that much money?" Nicci rolled her eyes. "I know what they are and how they work, but those things are damned expensive, Lupin. How did Regulus manage to afford all of this?" She gestured around at the plush (albeit depressing) lounge.

"Inheritance," Lupin growled. "The Black vaults went to him after Sirius got disowned. Didn't prevent Sirius from getting boatloads of money from other Black investments he seized after his father was killed..." There was an uncomfortable silence, while Lupin stared darkly at the basin.

"I get the feeling you don't want to do this," Nicci said coolly, crossing her arms over her chest. "What's the problem?"

"The memories aren't pleasant," Lupin replied grimly, "and they are disturbing at sections. Most of these memories in the basin are mine – for some reason, Regulus favors my recollections over others – and I don't have a lot of fond recollections."

"You're the cheerful sort."

"Just like you, right?" the werewolf shot back. Nicci glared daggers at him – it wasn't like he was far from the truth. "But that's the point. What you need to know – all of it – is in here, and most I can access. Regulus has magically blocked off memories he doesn't want us to see, but you'll see enough. In any case, you shouldn't be in any danger going in here – it's not like we can be seen or we can affect anything. My one warning is to stay away from Fiendfyre if we happen to see it – and if we go to the wrong memory, it's possible."

Nicci cocked an eyebrow. "What?"

“Hell is eternal, and that horrid stuff left unchecked is too,” Lupin growled. “It burns in this world and the next simultaneously, and while we are inside the memory, we are just as vulnerable to it. Be careful.”

Nicci snorted. “I’ll be fine. You’re the one who looks nervous.” And indeed, Lupin looked reluctant to approach the golden basin.

“That’s because you don’t know the context of everything that happened in those memories,” Lupin snapped icily. “I do. The first memory we’ll see, if everything goes right, is the night of September 14th, 1979.”

“That was before this whole Torrent thing,” Nicci said coolly.

“Things were bad enough in our world before the Torrent – although that helped to send it further to hell,” Lupin added with a grimace. “The day before, Sirius, James, and Lily had encountered a strange individual, one they all believed was dead – Regulus Black.”

Nicci frowned. “Why would they believe he was dead?”

Lupin shrugged. “He had vanished for a few months, and people who vanished without explanation in that time were assumed dead. We already knew he had defected – hell, Sirius was the one who requested we keep a spy on him. Well, the spy lost Regulus, and we assumed that he had been killed. But that morning, they found him – alive, scarred, and recklessly desperate. He had found a locket with a strange mark, and though he wouldn’t say what it was, they knew it was important – and that Regulus had fought like hell to get it.”

“Was that when he got... burned?” Nicci asked, almost tentatively. Hope Regulus left... this could get awkward in a hurry, especially the way Lupin’s talking.

Lupin shook his head. “No, that was later. Anyway, Sirius, Lily, and James ran into Regulus in York, and Sirius knew he had to inform Dumbledore. But the Death Eaters found out they were there – some spy had tipped them off – and they attacked. Regulus bolted, saying

he was going to Grimmauld Place, while the others went to the West County, where the Prewetts were living. Showed up at the worst possible time too... the Death Eaters had attacked in force. Gideon and Fabian Prewett were both dead by the end of it, and those three barely escaped with their lives. They made their way to my place.” A mirthless smile passed Lupin’s lips. “Almost at the exact same time as Dumbledore’s arrival with Moody and Kingsley, pulling a dying Snape in between them.”

Nicci nearly started. “Go back a second – how was Severus dying? You missed that part of the story!”

“I’m getting to it,” Lupin said coolly. “Snape had been attacked at his home in Hogsmeade by Bellatrix Lestrange, and he barely escaped to Hogwarts with his life. He met Hagrid on the way in, and Dumbledore came to meet Snape. I didn’t know what had been said between them, but it didn’t matter – yet.

“Dumbledore told Snape to go into hiding, but in his state of mind, he didn’t care. He went back to Spinner’s End, where his father had lived. Bellatrix, Rodolphus, and Rabastan were all waiting for him, and if it wasn’t for Kingsley tailing him, Snape would have been dead. As it was, he was going into shock when they hauled him into my shack.”

“So how did Dumbledore deal with the two issues?” Nicci asked, her knuckles white as she clutched her wand.

Lupin gritted his teeth. “He didn’t, and that was the point. He let me go with James, Sirius, and Lily to Grimmauld Place – one of the worst decisions of my life. Regulus was already there – and so was his father. Regulus was desperate, and somehow, he maximized a Fiendfyre curse to destroy that locket just as the Death Eaters were forcing their way in.”

“Wait...” Nicci said slowly, her mind going back to their short trip to Grimmauld Place yesterday – it was hard to believe they had been there just yesterday. She hadn’t gotten any sleep since then, but a quick look at the clock told her that it was already morning. I need

some sleep once this is through, she thought. I can't do this forever...
"There was something gold seared into the stones of the kitchen..."

"The locket," Lupin finished with a nod. "Regulus incinerated it, and his father was an unfortunate casualty in the blast. But he couldn't control the spell, and due to some... carelessness... Regulus ended up badly burned and near to death. If Dumbledore hadn't shown up in the nick of time and disjoined the spell, none of us would have survived that fire. But, of course, the Muggles show up just after Dumbledore leaves – the explosion set off a near riot, and the police were forced to act." The werewolf's face looked feral at that second, and Nicci nearly took a step back. "It was there I had my little... disagreement with Sirius Black."

"I can only imagine," Nicci muttered, turning back to the Pensieve. "So what happened? How did Regulus survive? And how does Severus factor into all of this?"

"I managed to escape from the cops that were arresting me, while James stayed behind to help Sirius," Lupin hissed. "Lily drove with Regulus in the ambulance – she could have likely stopped the conflict between Sirius and me if she had chosen to intervene, but she didn't even know... James didn't even bother to tell her until it was too late."

"So what did you do?" Nicci asked, watching the werewolf carefully as he approached the golden basin.

Lupin prodded the silvery substance, an expression of muted pain on his face as he watched it clear into a view of a beautiful, dimly lit office that Nicci immediately recognized – the Headmaster's Office at Hogwarts.

"I went to see Dumbledore," Lupin said softly. "To get some answers."

And taking hold of a startled Nicci's shoulder, he forced both of them – head-first – into the basin.

Nicci shut her eyes tightly as she felt herself falling. It wasn't that she had vertigo – it was just that she hated any sort of falling sensation with a passion. If this doesn't stop soon, I'm going to kill Lupin...

Suddenly, almost as if the landing was an afterthought, she found herself on the cold stone floor of Dumbledore's office. Lupin was beside her, a tense look on his face as he saw the Headmaster emerge from the fireplace against the wall in a flash of green fire.

Dumbledore looked quickly around the room before giving a short, curt nod to himself. Pulling a piece of paper from his desk, he began writing, his nose inches away from the parchment.

Without looking up, he spoke into the darkness. "Come out, Remus. I know you're here."

Nicci instinctively looked at Lupin standing beside her, but that was not who Dumbledore was referring to. A second later, there was the scuff on a boot on stone, and a young Remus Lupin emerged from the shadows.

Nicci whistled. "Even by my standards, you look terrible. Full moon?"

Lupin growled to himself. "I think so, if I remember correctly."

And indeed, the young Remus did look terrible. His face was bruised and his robes were charred tatters hanging off his frame. He was shivering, and Nicci could tell that he was soaking wet – which wasn't surprising, given the crack of thunder outside the windows of Hogwarts.

"How did you get in here, Remus?" Dumbledore asked quietly, not looking up. "I did not call a meeting of the Order yet..."

"It's not important," the young Remus muttered. There was a tense silence, while Dumbledore continued to write.

"How did you get in?" Nicci asked.

“Secret passages,” Lupin growled. “The Marauders found them all, and Dumbledore never knew the whole extent of which we knew Hogwarts.”

Finally, Dumbledore set aside his paper and looked up at the young, ragged werewolf. “I must say, I’m surprised you got to me so quickly. I did not hear a report yet from any of the others...”

“You probably won’t,” Remus said curtly. “Regulus is dying – the Muggles got him in an ambulance, but I don’t place good odds on his chances. Lily went with him. As for James and Sirius... well, I nearly avoided getting arrested by the Muggle police who wanted to question us.”

“You were their only witnesses,” Dumbledore said, turning towards the fire pit, which brightened immediately. “Would you care for tea? A sherbet lemon?”

Remus’s eyes darkened as he approached Dumbledore’s desk and sat in the chair in front of it. “I wouldn’t mind tea, thanks. No milk or sugar, please.”

“Suit yourself,” Dumbledore replied mildly, pouring himself a large cup and adding a liberal amount of lemon and sugar. Remus only watched Dumbledore, his eyes hooded, his posture tense.

Finally, Dumbledore set down his teaspoon and looked again at Remus. “So what can I do for you, Remus? How can I help you on such a dismal night?”

“If you only knew,” Lupin muttered, more to himself than to Nicci. The Remus sitting in the chair seemed barely able to control his fury.

“I want to know why you left us behind,” Remus said in a tight, hoarse voice. “I want to know why you abandoned us to deal with the Muggles. There’s a near-riot going on down there, and we’re responsible. People will end up dead because of this.”

Dumbledore seemed to slump in his chair. "I know, Remus. The cost is becoming high, especially for us, for we care about those who die – indirectly – because of us."

"Too high, I would say," Remus said coldly, glaring at Dumbledore. "We can't afford errors now. Voldemort is getting stronger and stronger every day, and he's so unpredictable that even our best can't see where he's going next. I mean, you honestly couldn't say you expected this!"

"I didn't expect this," Dumbledore acknowledged, taking a sip of his tea. "It was not what I had prepared for – although, when placed in context, it makes sense."

Remus was incredulous. "You mean to say... you mean to say that this all makes some sort of sense to you?"

Dumbledore set his cup down and set his fingertips together. "My conclusion – as I can derive it – is that there has been a major leak within Voldemort's forces. The simultaneous reappearance of Regulus Black and the near-murder of Severus Snape cannot be coincidence – the timing is too critical. I also believe," he added in a lower tone, "that Sybil Trelawney's recent disappearance also bodes ill. I fear the worst, for if she is a true Seer, Voldemort could make horrible use of her."

"You left Snape in my house... is he going to be all right?" Remus asked.

"Eventually... although three simultaneous applications of the Cruciatus Curse tends to be... taxing... to deal with," Dumbledore said, a frown crossing his face. "He is the one variable who does not fit in the equation. By all accounts, he was a loyal Death Eater-in-training. Why would Bellatrix come after him?"

"He's lucky to be alive and sane after that," Nicci muttered to herself, remembering with a pang the times she had been tortured.

“What does Snape have to say for himself?” Remus asked aggressively. “Alastor and Kingsley both don’t believe he’s reformed – what did he say to you to convince you?”

Dumbledore looked as if he was considering something very carefully, but after a tense few seconds, he shook his head. “That is a matter, Remus, between Severus Snape and myself.”

“Not while he’s in my house,” Remus growled. “I want answers, Professor. He’s the closest thing to a Death Eater, and he’s inside one of the Order’s safe-houses – my safe-house, Dumbledore! If I have to live under the same roof as him while he convalesces, I want answers, damn it!”

“You’ve got quite the temper,” Nicci observed with a smirk. Lupin glared at her, but said nothing.

Dumbledore gave the young, angry werewolf an intent look. “Do you trust me, Remus?”

Remus clenched his hands into fists as he got to his feet and began to pace. “Should I?”

“I would like to think so.”

“Give me incentive,” Remus challenged. “Why don’t you tell me what’s really going on with Snape, and why his survival has become so important all of a sudden?”

Dumbledore looked back to his papers. “Remus, I would like you to do me a favour – one that will make everything clear about exactly why I can now trust Severus.”

Remus set his hands against the back of the chair and leaned forward, a skeptical look in his eyes. “Name it.”

“I want you to convince Lily Evans to meet with Severus Snape.”

Remus looked at Dumbledore as if he had lost his mind. "Are you insane?" he asked hoarsely. "She hates him – after everything she did, and all she trusted him, he threw it all away!"

"Is that how you remember it, Remus?" Dumbledore asked, an unexpected chill in his voice. "Weren't you just ignoring the whole fight that day when Severus called Lily a Mudblood? Didn't you just let James and Sirius have their little fun?"

"How is that even relevant?" Remus asked furiously, but Nicci could hear the edge of uncertainty in his voice.

"Don't you remember what Lily called him?"

"It was... look, it doesn't matter! Snape still made his choice!"

"But did you ever stop to consider why?" Dumbledore asked, rising to his feet, that aura of implacable authority rising along with him. "His fascinated, yet tentative steps towards darkness were only aided by the neglect and cruelty that was shown to him here, Remus. Who else, indeed, was he to turn to? The last two years of Severus' stay at Hogwarts were some of his worst, for he had nobody but the cold and callous individuals who only wished to use him for their own petty gain. He had no friends that he could trust, and he had lost the one girl he had ever fallen in love with? I am not lying, Remus, when I say that love is the most powerful magic one can have – and Severus has been without it."

Remus looked as if he wanted to answer, but he couldn't because he had so many conflicting thoughts running through his mind. Finally, he shook his head. "I don't understand this... if this is all true, why the hell did he go back to his old house?"

"That, Remus, he hasn't even told me," Dumbledore said somberly. "I warned him not to, but he refused to listen..."

"Why did he go back to that place?" Nicci asked Lupin. "He told me he hated it there."

“You’ll see,” Lupin replied quietly.

The young Remus looked like he was struggling with his choices, but Dumbledore said nothing all the while. Finally, he simply sighed and turned to the window. “Sirius and I had a... disagreement after Lily left with Regulus. He and I are not likely to reconcile this time.”

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. “What about? Forgive my curiosity, but –”

“Personal issues,” Remus growled. “I would greatly appreciate some separation from him in Order operations, just to ensure... the, the integrity of the operations.”

“Oh, so diplomatic,” Nicci drawled. Even though Lupin threw her a baleful glare, she ignored him. “You could have just told Dumbledore that Black was a conceited asshole, but no, you considered the integrity of the Order first... despite the obvious lack of such...”

“Just shut up and watch,” Lupin hissed, but Nicci could tell that her comments had drawn blood. The fracturing of the Order must have been bad for him... wonder how Severus got involved...

“In any case, will you try to convince Lily?” Dumbledore persisted, an urgent note in his voice. “I wouldn’t mind having Severus as an ally in our cause.”

Remus flushed red. “So is that what it’s all about?” the young werewolf growled, turning back towards Dumbledore. “Trying to another ally in this damned war? Do you just want to use Severus like...?” His voice trailed off as he met Dumbledore’s steady gaze.

“We all have our parts to play, Remus,” the Headmaster said quietly.

And with that, the image dissolved into a haze of colour. Nicci shut her eyes against the expected falling sensation, but in an instant, it was gone, and she was sitting on cold linoleum.

She opened her eyes slowly as she got to her feet. She gritted her teeth against the smell of hot blood and charred flesh that filled the room, mixed with the sickly scent of antiseptics and alcohol. Yet it was not a perverse charnel house she was standing in – although from the state of some of the bodies in the room, it wouldn't be hard to mistake the two – but a large public hospital room, and not a good one either. Nicci could recognize an underfunded hospital when she saw one – she had spent a fair amount of time in such places when she had to recover from wounds suffered in the course of her work as a dealer agent.

“Why are we...” Nicci asked, turning to Lupin, who was standing in the shadows.

“Just watch, will you?” Lupin snapped with irritation as he walked between the beds towards one in the far corner, shielded by a curtain. His eyes were fixed on the newest arrival in the room – a bedraggled, limping, and tattered werewolf that Nicci knew could only be Lupin's younger version.

A second later, the curtain shifted, and Nicci saw a young woman – maybe only a year older than Draco or Harry – emerge. Her clothes were of better quality than Remus' – who she embraced tightly – but they were still tattered and charred in locations. She looks like she's been through hell... Nicci thought. Wonder who she is...

A second later, she had her answer as the woman pushed back her hood to reveal long, dark-red hair and bright green eyes – green eyes that Nicci had seen before.

“I thought you had been arrested for sure,” the woman whispered, her voice trembling. “I saw the police cars...”

“I'm fine, Lily,” Remus said, and Nicci was surprised to hear the tremor in his voice. “Regulus... how is he?”

Lily gestured towards the bed behind the curtains. “Hovering somewhere on the threshold between life and death, I guess... I've seen too many people end up that way recently...” She swallowed

back tears again, and Nicci could tell that Remus was holding back his emotions as well. "He's burned badly... all over his body, and the scratches are all infected, likely gangrenous..."

Nicci cocked an eyebrow. "You know, in the world I know, gangrene causes people to lose limbs, Lupin. Regulus seems one hell of a walking impossibility."

"We cured him, but it wasn't pleasant," Lupin muttered. "And not without costs... those scars are permanent. Now just be quiet, please?"

Lily was speaking again, her voice filled with concern. "What about James and Sirius? Did they make it out okay? I haven't been able to contact them..."

Remus' face abruptly darkened and he let go of Lily.

"Remus, what's wrong? Talk to me, Remus," Lily said urgently. "What happened? Are they okay? Did the Death Eaters —"

"I don't want to talk about it," Remus replied, a surprisingly icy tone in his voice.

"But James —"

"Is fine, along with... Sirius. But that's not what I'm here for. I'm on an assignment from Dumbledore."

"You still didn't tell me what happened to them!" Lily said angrily. "Damn it, Remus, I have a right to know, he's my bloody fiancé!"

"Let's just say they weren't the ones being dragged towards the police cars," Remus said evenly, looking back at Lily with haunted eyes.

Lily surprisingly brightened. "Did they get some Death Eaters, then? Even if they're Muggles, I'm sure they..." Her voice trailed off at the

look on Remus' face, and she understood. "Oh. Do they... do they know?"

Remus sighed. "No, my condition remains secret, thankfully. But I had a... disagreement with Sirius earlier, and the police chose to intervene."

Lily was silent for a few seconds, and then she sighed. "What happened?"

"You don't want to know –"

"Oh yes, Remus, I bloody well do!" Lily snapped. "I know Sirius Black as well as anyone, so tell me, what happened?"

"I took a swing at him and then accused him of running out on us and being a coward!" Remus snarled, his composure finally breaking. "Things sort of escalated from there!"

Lily put her hand to her lips. "Oh God, Remus..." To Nicci's surprise, she embraced him again, even as Remus shook with restrained sobs of anguish. "If there's anything I can do..."

"So... you don't..." Remus said, astonishment in his voice.

"Remus, we just went through hell and back to get Sirius' younger brother out of there, and you were the one who did it. Coupled with Dumbledore's... unreliability... it's understandable that you were angry with him –"

"Lily," Remus said, pulling out of the embrace and setting his hand on her shoulder, "this isn't just anger. This is the kind of thing friendships break over. And thinking back, it really was a long time coming – I just never had the moral strength to see it. But that's not the important thing. I've got a mission for you and I, and we have limited time. This is from Dumbledore himself."

Lily's face hardened. "I don't have a lot of energy to deal with him right now. He abandoned us to deal with the police and a riot!"

Spot on, girl, Nicci thought with a smirk, thinking of the way Dumbledore had behaved. Even though she didn't know the whole context of what had happened at Grimmauld Place, she got the feeling that if she were in Remus or Lily's shoes, the old Headmaster would have a lot more to worry about besides the Dark Lord.

"Lily, forget Dumbledore for a second," Remus said, his voice shaky, as if he was dreading every word. "It has... it has..."

"It has what?" Lily asked with confusion.

"It has to do with Snape," Remus finished in a hurry. "Dumbledore wants you to talk to him."

This time, Lily's face darkened. "Why should I?" she asked, her voice abruptly cold, almost emotionless.

"Because he's dying," Remus replied, grasping at straws as he stared at Lily's dispassionate face. "Because he's running out of time, and he's... and he's sorry, Lily. He went to Dumbledore last night and... and I don't know what he told Dumbledore, but he wants you to talk to him. You looked as if you wanted to, earlier."

"I was surprised to see him being carried into an Order safe house," Lily replied coolly. "And I've heard his apology before. Apologies have to be sincere, Remus, and after he apologized, he went up and joined the Death Eaters!"

"Where else was he supposed to go?" Remus snarled, and Nicci could tell that his patience was finally gone. "Damn it, Lily, I already went through this with Dumbledore, and frankly, I believe you, but that's not the point!"

"Then what is?" Lily snapped, but her voice trembled. "I heard his apology, Remus! I couldn't just believe it was sincere without proof!"

"But did you ever ask for any?" Remus shot back. Lily was tight-lipped in her silence, so the werewolf continued. "I take it that you did

not. Look, Dumbledore told me that Snape wouldn't have likely gone over to the Dark Side if we – meaning the Marauders – hadn't pushed him there. And despite my lack of interest in making his life a living hell, I'm still guilty by association and negligence. And you know what? If we follow that same logic, so are you."

Lily went red. "Me? I wasn't even with you half the time –"

"But you two were friends, and to Snape, you betrayed him – especially after you started dating James. You didn't tell James to ever stop, did you?"

Lily clenched her fist. "I can't believe you're telling me this, Remus. I expect this sort of thing from Dumbledore, who believes in the good of anything and everything, but not you."

"You're right, Lily, and you know what? I can't believe I'm telling you this either!" Remus replied heatedly. "But here I am, in this Merlin-forsaken hospital telling you that Dumbledore wants you to talk to Snape... I'm even defending him." Remus put his hand to his head. "I must not be thinking straight..."

"How much sleep have you gotten in the past few days?" Lily asked with concern.

"Not enough," Remus muttered. "You know, I can't believe this, even of me."

"Believe what?"

"Believe that despite everything Snape's done, and that he doesn't deserve the time of day, I'm still feeling... feeling guilty for that day by the lake where I watched James dangle him upside down by his ankles and take off his pants." Remus shook his head. "For all those times I watched as we hexed or tricked him... and we always got away with it. Nobody – not even Slughorn – would ever believe him."

"You made his life hell," Lily said accusingly.

“And so did you!” Remus snarled, slamming his fist on the edge of a chair. “Damn it, Lily, we’ve got the same amount of blame, just in different allotments! He didn’t deserve what we did to him, and he at least deserved your forgiveness, which you didn’t give! We were the ones who drove him to You-Know-Who, not Lucius Malfoy or Evan Rosier or any of them!”

“He called me a Mudblood, Remus,” Lily whispered, her eyes damp. “How can I exactly forgive that?”

“He didn’t mean it, he was in a House that said the damned word all the time, and besides, you can’t tell me he wasn’t sincere apologizing to you!” Remus replied, grasping Lily’s shoulder and looking into her big green eyes. “The Marauders were listening behind the portrait with the Invisibility Cloak, Lily, and James practically whooped when you blew off Snape’s pleading. Now it’s three years later, you haven’t spoken to him since, and he’s dying because the ‘Dark Lord’ he was serving double-crossed him. Now you can’t tell me that he won’t want to talk to you, try to apologize one last time before the end? Will it hurt to talk to him, at least?”

“I can’t believe you’re the one saying this,” Lily muttered again.

“That makes two of us,” Remus agreed, “and frankly, I’m just repeating what Dumbledore wants me to say, but if he’s in any way right – and the sick feeling of guilt in my gut is telling me that he might be – you should at least talk to him... and so, probably, should I,” he finished, a lump sitting in his throat.

There was a long silence, and Nicci turned to Lupin, an accusatory look on his face. “So from I’m hearing, you just sat and watched Severus get tortured by Potter and Black?”

“I’m not proud of it,” Lupin said quietly, “but I won’t deny it.”

“You’re a spineless coward,” Nicci spat furiously.

“What would you have me do?” Lupin snarled. “Betray my friends, the only friends I ever had? Not as easy as it seems, Miss Snape! Now just watch and you’ll see how this all pans out...”

Finally, Lily slumped her shoulders and turned away from the young Remus. “He probably won’t even want to talk to me... I mean, why didn’t he try while we were still at school?”

“Probably because you ignored him and started dating James,” Remus replied seriously. “It’s not like he didn’t ignore you either,” he hastily added as he noticed the flush rising on Lily’s face, “but he won’t now. He’s as much of a realist as I know, and if he knows... if he knows he’s done for it...” Remus swallowed hard. “I don’t think you’ll have a problem talking to him.”

He put his arms hesitantly around Lily, and before Nicci could even blink, she felt the scene around her dissolve again. She closed her eyes, and a second later, she felt her feet land again – this time on rough stone. She opened her eyes to reveal a dimly lit kitchen, where two figures were sitting by the chipped and scratched table.

“Where are we?” Nicci asked, frowning.

“My house, this time,” Lupin said coolly, rubbing a smear of blood from below his jaw. “That’s Alastor ‘Mad-Eye’ Moody at the table, and —”

“Kingsley Shacklebolt,” Nicci growled, recognizing her former enemy in a second. “What’s he doing here?”

“He and Moody brought your beloved brother in,” Lupin retorted. “If Kingsley hadn’t followed Severus to Spinner’s End, he would have been dead.”

Nicci raised her hands. “Hey, my problems with Kingsley aren’t the same as Severus’. It’s a private score, of sorts...” She really didn’t know how to explain to Lupin the whole luhix disaster in her world, how she had shot Kingsley in the shoulder in one of the fights. “Just forget it. Isn’t this your memory, anyways? Where are you?”

Lupin pointed at the shabby door, and a second later, his younger version entered the house, Lily right behind him. Both of them looked drenched.

Both of the figures at the table rose, and Nicci could see both in sharper light from the lamp Remus flicked on. She didn't recognize the older Auror, but she would recognize the solid features of Kingsley Shacklebolt anywhere. God, he looks so much like his brother... except he looks so much more serious...

"You're back," Kingsley said with relief. "I heard... Lily! I didn't see you there!"

"Good to see you too, Kingsley, Moody," Lily said tiredly. "Pass me a towel, will you?"

"I don't understand why you don't just Apparate into the house," the older Auror growled, his voice a hoarse rasp that matched his scarred face. Nicci winced as she saw the marks – she knew curse scars when she saw them; hell, she had a bunch of them that she wasn't fond of showing. Damned Dolohov...

"I can't configure the wards right, Moody, you know that," Remus replied, wiping his eyes. "I don't suppose you've heard from..."

"Yeah, we have," Moody said in a low voice. "But we've also heard from Dumbledore, and like it or not, we're in your house. I'm not gonna arrest you because you got in a fight with Sirius, Remus. That's between the two of you."

"It was more than a fight," Remus muttered.

"That remains to be seen," Moody snapped. "In any case, I heard from Dumbledore that Lily here needs to see the Snape boy."

"Is he still..."

Kingsley sighed heavily, his normally reassuring eyes shadowed with despair. "I'm sorry, Remus. He's barely conscious, and it'd take a miracle to heal him now. We've done what we could, but without qualified Healers... and we can't do much for psychological or emotional damage anyways, not with magic..."

"Where is he?" Lily asked, her voice shaking slightly. "How much longer does he...?"

"Waited long enough, lass?" Moody asked scornfully. He jerked a scarred hand towards a closed door. "He's in there. Good luck getting through to him."

Lily's eyes brimmed with tears, and Remus' hand clenched into a fist, but Kingsley threw a warning glare at the older Auror, and Moody fell silent.

"Lily, do you want..."

"No," Lily replied defiantly. "I'll do this on my own." And without even taking off her cloak, she wrenched the door open of the room Moody indicated and closed it behind her.

Remus glared at Moody. "Did you have a good reason for doing that, Moody? It wasn't necessary!"

"Sorry if I'm hardly the bringer of happiness and fluffy white rabbits, Lupin, but sometimes a good shock or reality is what people need," Moody snapped.

"You honestly think Lily doesn't know about reality?" Remus asked incredulously. "Moody, she's been through hell the past year! Even since we graduated, it's been one losing fight after another, and she's lost as many friends as any of us! Hell, she knew the twins, and we just lost them yesterday!"

"Remus, relax," Kingsley said sharply. "Moody, that's enough. You might be one of the best Aurors the Ministry has, but that doesn't

mean the Order hasn't lost as many – if not more – people than your department!”

Moody gritted his teeth. “I know... believe me, I know. You think that it's easy training those poor bastards that the Ministry's using as cannon fodder? I can still see their innocent naïve faces when I close my eyes... and it doesn't help with the tactics that Bartemius is using...”

“Crouch fights fire with fire,” Remus muttered darkly. “Look, I should be there with Lily. Anything I need to know about Snape's condition?”

“He just kept shaking and muttering to himself,” Kingsley said in a low voice. “He's clinging by fingertips to his sanity, and it's not pretty to watch the struggle. When he's lucid, he keeps saying he's sorry... both to some man named Tobias and to...” Kingsley's voice trailed off at the expression on Remus' face. “Oh. Oh, damn.”

“Lily,” Remus said softly. “Merlin, Dumbledore was right.” And without another word, he wrenched the door open and approached the ragged guest bed, where a young, haggard Severus Snape was lying.

Nicci could barely restrain a gasp as she saw the younger version of her brother. His hair was long, oily, and matte black, and did nothing to conceal or help his sallow features. Even younger, there was no health in his face, and his paleness made it obvious that Severus had not seen sunlight in a long time.

She swallowed hard, despite herself – she remembered when she had looked very much like her brother. And if he graduated from Hogwarts only a year before... it took me seven years to look that bad... from the looks of things, the Dark Lord was slowly killing him!

“Severus...” Lily whispered, dropping next to him. “Severus, can you hear me?”

Remus swallowed hard as he approached Lily. “He... Lily, he... oh damn...”

“What’s the problem?” Lily asked quickly, looking up at Remus. “What’s wrong with him?”

“That’s what’s wrong,” Remus replied, looking at Severus’ bare left arm, marred by nasty white scars and a single swirling mark.

“The Dark Mark...” Lily whispered. “But why is it all blurry...?”

“That’s because it’s not the Dark Mark,” Lupin replied curtly in the silence, finishing the sentence Lily left unfinished.

Nicci gave him a sharp look. “What?”

“You heard me. I knew what the damned thing looked like – we used it to identify Death Eaters, because it’s difficult to conceal well – and that’s not it. And Severus never got the Mark – it was only given to those admitted into the Dark Lord’s inner circle, and Severus never got in that far.”

Lily looked panicked as she saw the swirling tattoo on Severus’ arm begin to shift and recoil against his skin, turning the grey of dead flesh...

“Remus, it’s –” Lily began, but Remus was already yelling. A second later, Moody and Kingsley burst in, wands drawn.

“The Mark’s reactivating the curses!” Remus said hurriedly. “Look how Snape’s clenching his jaw. It’s against the pain! And soon he’s going to –”

A second later, an ear-piercing howl split the air. Nicci slapped her hands to her ears with pain, but it was not enough to restrain the feelings of horror welling up within her – she had never heard Severus scream like that. And he wasn’t stopping.

“What the hell’s wrong with him?” Moody roared, pointing his wand at Severus and wordlessly firing a Stunning Spell at him – that did absolutely nothing. “His Mark...”

“That’s not a Mark!” Lily screamed. And before Severus’ scream reached any new volumes, she flipped her wand over in her hand and slapped it down on the whirling Mark. “Effrego lanx!”

There was an earsplitting crack, and Nicci, despite herself, threw herself back as Severus’ body leapt up from the bed, only to fall back – hard – against the mattress. It’s like he’s been blasted with one of those damned defibrillator things, she thought, trying to adjust to the strange silence in the room – Severus had stopped screaming.

He had also stopped breathing.

Nicci watched in horror as Lily shook with sobs as she knelt beside Severus’ bed. Remus and the Aurors both looked stricken.

Nicci rounded on Lupin furiously, who was watching dispassionately. “You told me he was alive! You didn’t say he died in between!”

“Keep watching,” Lupin only said, his eyes narrowing, “and remember that sometimes death is a... relative thing.”

Chapter 19

When her vision cleared, Nicci was standing in a graveyard.

“Oh, bloody hell,” she muttered, leaning against a tombstone as she shook her head. “I hate that transition.”

“You should have expected it,” Lupin said humorlessly. “It was the end of the memory.”

“Shut up. Just shut up,” Nicci snarled. “I’m not in the mood to deal with you right now... why the hell are we in a graveyard, anyways? You told me Severus —”

“I said ‘death was a relative thing’,” Lupin interrupted coolly. “But a bit of an explanation is required here, in any case. This is the next day, the fifteenth of September, 1979.”

“And why, exactly, are we in a graveyard?” Nicci asked angrily. “No funeral arrangements go that fast. And even if Severus is...” She swallowed back the rising lump in her throat. “Even if he was gone, nobody would care enough to arrange a funeral this fast.”

“They care when James Potter was involved,” Lupin growled. “The man walked into my house just a few minutes after Severus stopped breathing. Nearly cheered, he did. Suffice to say, the confrontation...”

“I can only imagine,” Nicci muttered, feeling another rush of loathing for James Potter surge into her. “How did the Aurors manage to stop Lily from murdering her fiancé?”

“They didn’t — they were too busy holding me back,” Lupin hissed, turning away with disgust. “Dumbledore showed up in the nick of time and broke up the fight before everything went to hell. Lily left with James in the end, who volunteered to pay for immediate funeral arrangements and even a reception.”

“Why would she even want to leave with that bastard?” Nicci asked incredulously. “He was obviously gloating!”

“To some degree, yes, but he sobered up when he realized that it was likely Lily’s spell that caused the whole mess, and that she was feeling horrendously guilty. Bit of a conflict of interest, that,” Lupin snorted. “So James toned down his obvious glee and tried to console his future wife. His offer to pay for everything went a long way – that, and the fact that Dumbledore was visibly furious when he saw James’ satisfaction that his long-standing rival for Lily’s affection was gone.”

“Old bastard got something right...” Nicci muttered furiously. “But Lily must have seen through Potter’s act – I mean, why would he want to pay for a funeral for a man he hated? He was just savouring the good moment!”

Lupin clenched his fists. “Lily thought James was sincere, and the dressing-down he got from Dumbledore made it appear that he was actually contrite. Despite everything, she still trusted James above anyone... even me.” He turned away and slumped against a tombstone. “But, of course, Dumbledore had his own plans, and even Severus, being the wily bastard he was, had a few tricks up his sleeve...”

Nicci frowned in confusion, but before she could say anything, she saw several figures appear in a rough circle on the other side of the graveyard. Between them was a massive black coffin, carried by four burly Aurors.

As she moved closer, her breath hitched in her chest. She knew whose funeral this was.

Despite herself, she thought back to the brief, almost abortive service that Severus had had at Hogwarts. Only a few words were spoken – mostly by Harry Potter, for neither she nor Draco had trusted themselves to speak – before Severus’ body was buried. Despite the large crowd of people who had attended, it had been a very awkward service, with few tears shed. Severus had been a very private man with no true friends, and even his legacy as an outstanding Potions

professor had been marred by his murder and subsequent replacement of Albus Dumbledore.

It hadn't helped that Rita Skeeter had been there, collecting 'notes' for her next book. Nicci felt grimly proud that she – along with Lucius Malfoy and Harry Potter – had been responsible for magically throwing the terrible woman out of the service.

Rita Skeeter was not present at this funeral, and there were no large crowds. Only a few people stood near the new grave, mostly members of the Order of the Phoenix. Nicci spotted the young Remus in a second; standing alone, he was looking even worse than usual, his face unshaved and hollow. Dumbledore was there too, and looked less like an awe-inspiring Headmaster and more like a grieving, regretful old man.

Drawing their wands, the Aurors slowly lowered the coffin into the hole with muttered spells. Dumbledore looked around and cleared his throat to speak.

“Perhaps a few minutes more...”

With a sudden crack that nearly made Nicci jump, a dozen figures appeared out of the fog that seemed to fill the graveyard like a sickening wet blanket. They were led by a single figure, wearing brand-new black robes and a smirk he quickly concealed.

James Potter.

“I think this might be it, Professor,” James said, trying to keep a somber tone. “You can start the service –”

“You don't decide that, James,” Remus growled, stepping close, his eyes blazing with fury. “This is Snape's funeral, not yours.”

“I paid for this, Remus, you don't tell me how to conduct it,” James snapped back, the coldness in his eyes betraying his true emotions. If I had been there, I would have strangled Potter in a second, Nicci

thought to herself, and it was difficult even to hold herself back from attacking the memory.

“At least he wouldn’t suffer...”

“What was that?” Lupin asked sharply.

“Nothing, nothing...”

“We appreciate your act of generosity, James, as long as we remember the spirit in which the gift was given,” Dumbledore said calmly, but frowning slightly. “But I do agree, that we should continue with the ceremony. As requested, I will read the eulogy –”

“No, you won’t,” a quiet voice said from behind James.

Nicci’s mouth fell open in astonishment as Lily stepped forward, pulling out a scrap of paper from her black dress. She was wearing a silver-and-green Slytherin sash around her waist – where she had gotten that, Nicci had no idea – and her green eyes, despite their dampness, were filled with iron.

James sputtered. “Lily, come on... let Dumbledore speak his...”

“Who knew Severus best?” Lily said, her voice trembling slightly. “Who was his only friend? Who killed him to save him? Me, James. Professor, let me speak.”

Dumbledore only nodded mutely and stepped aside, allowing Lily to approach the grave. Nicci gave Lupin an incredulous look.

“She killed him to save him? Melodramatic at all? She speaks like it was her intent to kill my brother, not a bloody accident!”

“Just shut up and watch,” Lupin growled roughly.

Lily looked down at the closed black coffin and, despite herself, closed her eyes with evident pain. After swallowing hard, she looked back up at the meager group, her eyes wet with tears.

“I’ve... known Severus Snape for a long time. We were the closest friends could be as children. He was the first one who told me I was a witch.” She choked back a hint of a laugh. “Yes, Severus thought it was something so magical, so awe-inspiring... and I first took it as an insult. Kind of ironic, when you think of it.”

She looked back at the grave. “We were friends... but our friendship wasn’t that between lovers or comrades-in-arms like we have today. No, it was something... different, really. His relationship with his parents was atrocious, and when his mother died, things just deteriorated until he left home.” Lily wiped her eyes with a shaking hand. “He... he didn’t really have a lot of support at school either. Just me... until everything went wrong...”

She swallowed hard. “I didn’t know Severus that well in the last years of his life, cut so cruelly short. We broke from each other, and things ended rather... badly. He tried to make things up to me early, but I never accepted it. Some things, I thought, were just... unforgivable...” Her voice shook, and she clenched a fist, trying to regain control. “It was only... only near the end when I realized... when I realized that... that he would have forgiven me in a heartbeat if I had only forgiven him.” She put a hand to her eyes, and Nicci noticed that several of the people in the audience – Remus Lupin and Dumbledore among them, were exchanging rather guilty looks. Oh, so now they’re feeling like they’ve done something wrong? she thought furiously, glaring at the memories. Couldn’t you have remembered that a bit earlier, you self-righteous bastards?

Lily took a shuddering breath and looked back at the small crowd. “I knew... that at the end, there was good in Severus. In the end... he wanted to be saved, forgiven. In the end, he was a braver man than anyone ever expected of him, and I hope that wherever he goes, that bravery is recognized for the virtue that it is.” She took a steadying breath and stepped away from the grave, where James, wearing an expression of concern, put his hand on her shoulder.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. “Very... apt sentiments, Lily, I appreciate them, and so should we all.” With a wave of his wand, he filled the grave with dirt. A small grey headstone sprouted out of the

dirt, and Nicci's breath hitched in her throat as she read the inscription.

Severus Tobias Snape

Born January 9th, 1960

Died September 14th, 1979

There is magic in sincere forgiveness, the magic to heal. In forgiveness you grant, but more so, in forgiveness you receive.

"Now, if you'd all please proceed to that small house over the hill, so we might have the reception," Dumbledore said calmly. "James, if you would lead?"

Nicci closed her eyes, trying to contain the rage that was surging through her. Dumbledore doesn't care... the old bastard doesn't even care that Severus is dead... I could strangle him right now...

She felt a hand on her shoulder. "Easy, Miss Snape," Lupin said grimly. "Let's follow the party, and I can tell you it only gets worse from here."

She felt the image shift and the ground drop out from beneath her, and a second later, she landed on cold marble. She could hear voices in subdued conversation around the room.

"The funeral reception," Nicci murmured as she opened her eyes. She could feel her heart hammering in her chest. Not now, she thought. I don't need those memories now...

"That's right," Lupin said. "James decided to host it at one of his cottages that happened to be near the cemetery. If we had known why he was doing it... well, suffice to say, Severus would have been buried after –"

"Is he dead or isn't he?" Nicci finally snarled, turning to Lupin with frustration.

“He’s not, but it’s complicated,” Lupin replied sternly.

“Good, then stop talking about him like he is,” Nicci snapped shortly. Her eyes quickly found Dumbledore, who was talking – more like arguing, from her point of view – with a rather out-of-place-looking man. Wearing a crisp black Muggle suit beneath his black overcoat, he stood out amongst the numerous figures in robes.

“Who is that?” Nicci asked curiously.

“Dorcas Meadowes,” Lupin growled. “For all intents and purposes, he was a traitor to Dumbledore and us. He worked for the Dark Lord – he was a spy for the Order originally, but he double-crossed us later on. He’s dead now.”

“He’s like Severus, then,” Nicci muttered.

“What did you say?”

“It’s not important,” Nicci hastily replied. Can’t give much more information away... “Why does Dumbledore look so angry with him?”

“The two were... acquaintances when they were younger, but they have views of the world. Frankly, I can’t see why Dumbledore ever chose him as a spy; he could never really trust him... although, in retrospect, our best information always came from Meadowes in the end...”

Nicci was perplexed by the elderly man in Muggle garb. He seemed the very embodiment of crisp professionalism, with flattened and well-trimmed silver hair and a penetrating stare. This is the spy that Dumbledore used against the Dark Lord? I never would have guessed... well, that makes sense, in a twisted sort of way, that if I would never have guessed him, he makes an ideal spy...

“That’s James and I,” Lupin said quietly, pointing at the two who were talking softly in the shadows. “Let’s follow them... this is important...”

James seemed to be pulling Remus into a side room, an exasperated expression on his face. Nicci looked back towards Meadows with fascination; there was something about his demeanor that perplexed and confused her...

“Now, Nicci!”

She twisted away quickly, and darted between the gap of the closing door of the side room, Lupin right behind her.

It was a small room, simply decorated and designed, but Nicci immediately had an uneasy feeling about the room. It seemed smaller than she knew it actually was – almost claustrophobic. It feels too small to contain both Remus and James... hell, it's too small to contain James' ego, let alone anything else.

“...I don't see why you continue playing on with this charade,” Remus snarled, glaring at James with disgust and disappointment. “I thought I knew you better than that. Even after Dumbledore ripped you apart last night, you still feel the need to flaunt your smug satisfaction that Snape is dead. It's disgusting, James, and I never would have thought that of you. Hell, the only way you could have made things worse would be if you had brought Padfoot with you!”

“Would you just keep quiet?” James hissed in a low voice. “Yes, I can admit that I'm not sorry Snivellus is dead, but I do still have a problem, and it's with Lily.”

“You're only hurting her more this way,” Remus spat savagely. “Snape was her friend!”

“They broke away from each other!”

“Because of something Snape did, something he desperately regretted. He tried to apologize, and for his efforts, he ended up dead in an accident – by Lily's hands.” Remus turned away from James with disgust. “And now you keep rubbing that fact in her face.”

“I’m not trying to –”

“It doesn’t matter that you’re not trying to, Prongs, you are anyway by acting so smug here! That’s the impression that you’re giving Lily, James – that you don’t care about Snape’s death and subsequently don’t care about her.”

“But that’s not true!” James said frantically. “I do care about Lily. I’m not going to say I’m sorry that Snape’s dead, but really, the man was a black-hearted arse who loathed every inch of me and cursed the ground I walked on! I don’t exactly feel bad that he’s dead!”

“But Lily does,” Remus replied curtly. “And as her fiancé, you should be comforting her and supporting her, not gloating over your rival’s death.”

“Snivellus wasn’t ever a rival,” James said with a scoff. “He never had the talent –”

“James, you know that’s not what I meant by ‘rival.’”

The colour drained from James’ face. “You think Lily still harbors feelings for Snape? That... oh, I don’t know, that she still likes him?”

“Why haven’t you asked her?” Remus asked disdainfully. “I’m not the one to tell you how Lily thinks. You may have coined me the ‘expert on feelings’ back in school, but I know better now. I can tell you this obvious little fact, though: if you don’t want to lose Lily forever, you need to support her right now. From everything we know about this mess, Snape was seeking her forgiveness when that Dark Mark activated, and Lily’s magic caused Severus’ heart to stop. In simple terms, she’s feeling incredibly guilty right now because she thinks she was responsible for her former best friend’s death. In reality, it was an accident, and she needs to be made aware of that. If you want to help –”

“I do,” James said earnestly.

“Then try telling her that,” Remus finished tiredly, turning and looking out the window towards the fog-shrouded trees. “She’ll need time.”

“Something I don’t have much of,” James muttered.

“What was that?”

“Nothing, it’s just... well, I don’t have a lot of time,” James said, rubbing his temple as if he had a frustratingly bad headache. “You know that my father’s... condition...”

Remus nodded. “Have they diagnosed it yet?”

James slumped. “Advanced magical consumption. He’ll be dead within eighteen months.”

Remus looked stricken. “By Merlin, I’m sorry, James.”

James shook his head. “It was going to happen eventually, the damned disease runs in the family, and I can expect that if I don’t die fighting Voldemort then I’ll get it too. But that’s not the point. After Mum died last year, my father’s been wondering how the Potter line is going to continue.” He shook his head wistfully. “He’s like any other pureblood in that regard.”

Remus looked wary. “He does know that Lily’s Muggleborn, right?”

“Yeah, he knows, but he doesn’t care. As long as he can hold a grandchild in his arms before he dies, he’ll be content. And Remus, I want to do this for him.” James looked desperate. “I’ve lived off the family money for years and have given nothing in return, and the least thing I can do is give my father an heir to the Potter name. That’s why I want to marry Lily at Christmas.”

Remus whistled. “That’s quick. Normally pureblood weddings take months to prepare, not twelve weeks. And that’s cutting the timeline awfully short if you counting on a nine-month pregnancy.”

“I know that, but it’s the best I can manage. The point of all of this is that... well, I want you to come to my wedding as one of my groomsmen.”

Remus smiled, albeit weakly. “I can do that for you, James.”

“Sirius is my best man.”

Remus’ face abruptly darkened, and turned towards the window. James looked pleading.

“Remus, please –”

“I can’t forgive him, Prongs. It was one time over the line too many. It’s over.”

“Do it for the Marauders.”

“I’m not a Marauder anymore, Prongs,” Remus said softly. “There are no Marauders anymore, James. It’s over. I quit.”

“We formed our little band because we were trying to help you, and now you’re throwing that away?” James said incredulously. “Remus, why can’t you just –”

“James, I’ll come to your wedding, but there’s nothing anymore between Padfoot and I. If I saw him coming my way, I’d turn and walk in the opposite direction.” Remus clenched his fist. “There was a breaking point for me, James. You might be able to tolerate everything that Padfoot has done, but I couldn’t. He uses people, James, and throws them away when he’s done with them. He attacks anything that resembles the family he once had, and I wouldn’t trust him not to dispose of Regulus in the end. And he’s a coward of the worst sort – he won’t even acknowledge it.” He shook his head. “I’m sorry, but I’m sick of it – sick of him.”

“He’s not all bad, Remus,” James said, but there was a note of uncertainty in his voice that made Remus snort with savage triumph.

“It’ll be the same for you, Prongs. He’ll throw you away when he’s done –”

“Remus, enough,” James said firmly. “Stop being such a child, for Merlin’s sake. You had a disagreement with Sirius – get over it. I want you both at my wedding, and I want you both to be civil to each other – at least as much as you can manage. You might not be able to forgive each other for this mess, but the least you can do is not go for his throat the second you see him. That being said,” he hastily added, seeing the furious look on Remus’ face, “I won’t say that Sirius’ isn’t entirely at fault here, but if you won’t forgive him –”

“It’s not that I won’t forgive him,” Remus spat, “but that I can’t. I can’t accept everything he’s done in good conscience. But I will come to the wedding – for everything you’ve done, James. You still have your own problems to work out, but you were a friend for a long time, and I’ll do this for you.”

“I still want to be your friend, Remus!” James said with exasperation. “Look, it doesn’t have to be over between us because you broke with Sirius; there are no sides here!” Rummaging around in his robe pocket, he pulled out a small, rather dirty mirror and handed it to Remus with a weak smile. “You should have this, at least, so you and I can stay in touch, if you don’t want to talk to Sirius – he still lives part-time with me.”

“Isn’t this Padfoot’s mirror?” Remus asked suspiciously, holding it in the stream of grey light coming from the window.

James’ smile took on a strained quality. “Well, yeah, but that’s not the point. I was the one who created it anyways. I know you probably have to be off soon... can we keep in touch? Please? I don’t want to lose one of my best friends.”

Remus stared at his reflection – ragged, even in his better robes – for a long few seconds, before finally tucking the mirror carefully into a pocket. “All right, James, but I’ll need some time, just to get used to... things as they are...”

Nicci frowned as the memory before her began to waver and fade. “That’s it?” she asked, turning to Lupin. “What about Meadows?”

“I didn’t see him as I left,” Lupin said, watching as the colours in the room seemed to run together into grey. With a gut-clenching shift, Nicci felt the ground wrench beneath her...

This time she was standing in a bedroom. Remus was sprawled on the sagging bed, still in his day clothes, his sheets tousled around him.

Nicci noticed the bottle lying beside the bed and smirked despite herself. “Indulged a little before your nap, Lupin?”

“It helped,” Lupin replied in a harsh tone, staring at his memory simulacrum on the bed.

Nicci grinned, nudging the bottle next to her foot, mildly amused to see her foot pass right through it. Guess I can’t even affect alcohol... hang on, where’s the liquor in the bottle?

She looked around and noted with astonishment, that the room had an oddly decrepit look to it. Thick dust covered every surface, even the sheets Remus was under. The alarm clock barely rattled on the bedside table, dust and grime having clogged the gears. Cobwebs hung heavy throughout the room, and Nicci thought she saw a rat dart into a crack in the wall.

The sheets shifted, and Remus’ eyes opened. He opened his mouth to yawn – only to release a colossal sneeze.

“Damnit,” the werewolf cursed under his breath as he staggered out of bed, clearly hung-over, towards the closet. He pulled it open and froze. Nicci’s eyes widened as she saw the moths – dozens of them – all over Remus’ meager robes.

“What the...” Remus asked, confusion clear on his face as he frantically swatted the insects away from what was left of his robes. “How could this have...”

He pulled his bedroom door open, his shoes kicking up dust as he walked into the kitchen – a mess of rusted cutlery, cobwebs, and moulding food left on the counters. Nicci wrinkled her nose at the stench of rot, and she could see Remus gagging in disgust and complete confusion.

He pulled the mirror – surprisingly clean – out of his pocket. “James! Wake up! Something’s happened to my house!”

A few seconds later, James’ panicked voice erupted from the mirror. “Mine too! The manor’s covered in dust and filth, and nobody knows why! I’m going to the Ministry – they’re the ones that specialize in these sort of catastrophes!”

And before Nicci could shut her eyes, the memory shifted with a gut-wrenching twist – into complete chaos.

People filled the Entrance Hall of the Ministry of Magic, most still wearing nightclothes, all confused and very angry. The hall rang with furious shouts and surprised yelps from the newsstand, which was overfilled with copies of the Daily Prophet. Nicci quickly spotted Remus shoving his way through the crowd with James, towards where a dozen harassed Ministry officials – still in pajamas – were trying to hold back the mob.

“All these Prophets are completely blank!” a portly man shouted, waving a dozen blank newspapers in the air. “And there are thousands of them! What the hell is going on?”

“All my food went moldy, and my house is infested with rats overnight!” a thin old woman screeched.

“All my stock in the apothecary went rotten and is ruined!” another man roared. “I lost hundreds of Galleons in merchandise!”

“Where’s the Minister? He promised that we’d be safe from You-Know-Who’s attacks! This must be one of them!”

Remus and James finally, with extensive use of elbows, got to the front, where the Minister for Magic – still in his nightshirt, but with a relatively intact cloak thrown over it – had just arrived. He was a portly fellow, balding with a thick mustache. He looks exactly like a used vacuum cleaner salesman, Nicci thought snidely. What a grand figure as a Minister for Magic!

“Heard from Dumbledore yet?” James asked breathlessly, shoving his way past the Ministry official to look directly at the astounded Minister.

“Now see here, young man, this is hardly –”

“I’m an Auror or the closest thing to it, and this is a crisis situation!” James shouted over the din. “Now do you want my help or not? If this really is one of Voldemort’s attacks –”

There was another loud pop, and another man rushed up behind the Minister. Like most of the crowd, he was livid. Unlike most of them, he was wearing a simple, if rather old-fashioned, grey Muggle suit that looked rather presentable. With a narrow toothbrush mustache and extremely straight parting of his hair, he looked like a man that one would rather not cross.

“Barty!” the Minister exclaimed. “Thank Merlin you’re here –”

“Where’s Dumbledore?” the newcomer snarled. “By all that is holy, Acontine, didn’t you think to call him before coming to this? I’ve got Aurors and Magical Law Enforcement on the way, but there’s no telling what –”

“Crouch, you’ll need more than Aurors to hold back this mob!” James snapped, out of patience. “Remus and I just got here, and the crowd’s still growing. Someone needs to seal the Floo Network before we have a riot in the Entrance Hall –”

“I can’t just order the shutdown of the Floo Network because we have a crisis at the Ministry!” Minister Acontine shouted, his eyes aghast at the growing and angry crowd. “We need Dumbledore –”

There was a terrifyingly loud roar, and quite a few people screamed. Nicci spun to see a motorbike erupt out of one of the largest fireplaces near the end of the hall and take immediately to the air, its engine spewing exhaust as it soared over the terrified mob. A second later, the bike had touched down with a screech of gears behind the Ministry picket.

Sirius Black – easily recognizable to Nicci, as a jolt of hot fury filled her stomach at the very sight of the man – staggered off his bike and pulled Lily down with him. Sirius looked panicked, while Lily just looked sick.

“I got here as fast as I could –”

“Quite the entrance, Black,” Crouch snarled. “I think you broke about a dozen Floo Network regulations taking that damned thing through there! What were you thinking, you could have been killed!”

“There’s no time for that now, we have to get to Dumbledore!” Lily screamed over the increasingly loud roar of the mob. “Where are the Aurors?”

“We couldn’t mobilize enough –”

“There wasn’t time –”

“This is all your fault –”

“SILENCE!”

The silence was deafening in the chamber as Dumbledore strode out of the shadows of the hall, his blue eyes blazing. He was wearing the same robes as he had been during the funeral, but he didn’t seem to care.

“I had to deal with a near riot in Hogwarts at approximately eight-seventeen this morning,” Dumbledore said, his voice magically amplified and booming across the hall. “Everything was covered in

dust, mold, and cobwebs, and the grounds were filled with unchecked magical greenery that had broken free of our greenhouses. Not to worry, this was quelled without sufficient problem with the aid of the Hogwarts staff.”

Dumbledore’s eyes swept the room. “This... decaying affect seems to have happened everywhere where there is magic, but I urge you all not to panic. As of right now, I cannot tell you what created this calamity, but I can say that –”

“Headmaster, I’ve heard the date from some Muggles outside my house,” a hoarse voice shouted from one of the closer fireplaces. Nicci saw with some astonishment Alastor Moody limping up towards Dumbledore, parting the crowd in his wake. “And I’ve got a Muggle paper... you have to see this...”

Dumbledore’s eyes narrowed as he took the paper from Moody’s outstretched hand and scanned the front page. “I don’t see...”

“Look at the date, Headmaster,” Moody said, an edge in his voice.

Dumbledore froze, his eyes widening slightly with shock. He lowered the paper from his face, an expression of confusion and dawning horror on his face.

“This is impossible,” he murmured, his amplified voice carrying throughout the hall.

“What’s impossible?” Crouch demanded. “Albus, what has You-Know-Who done this time?”

“Voldemort could not do this,” Dumbledore said in a voice betraying a rare tremble. “This, by everything we know about magic, could not have happened.”

“What?” James shouted with frustration. “What happened? What caused all this?”

Dumbledore slowly looked up and faced the crowd. "I'm going to tell you all what Auror Moody showed me on this copy of the daily newspaper that the Muggle print. It is necessary you know the truth of the matter. From this paper... the date today is September 16th, 1989."

The hall was silent. Nearly everyone in the massive room had gone pale with shock and fear.

Minister Acontine looked at Dumbledore, a weak and horrified look his face. "But Albus... how can we lose a decade in one night?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "I don't know, Athanasius. I honestly don't know."

Nicci turned to Lupin, who had been completely silent throughout the entire scene. "Is this... the day after the Torrent?"

Lupin nodded simply. "Yes. Yes, it is."

Chapter 20

Morning dawned over London.

The full police attack on the besieged night club was long over, but the tumult was surrounding it was not. Streets had been cordoned off, squad cars poured in, and dozens of Muggle police and investigators flooded both the building and the empty street, fending off the streams of reporters and camera crew trying to record the disaster zone.

One area that had been quickly cleared by investigators was a small, underground parking garage, exiting onto a side street from under the main building. The investigators had already ruled that the garage door had been broken by an unregistered getaway vehicle, and that the other cars inside had escaped right behind it. After collecting whatever paint samples they could from the scratched and broken shards, they had packed up and moved on, allowing gleeful reporters to snap pictures of the shattered door.

But even they left when morning came, and thus no one saw a young man in a slightly rumpled suit leave the garage.

Running his hands through his hair and carefully stowing his wands inside his jacket, he slowly moved out onto the main street, cautiously straightening his glasses as he went. Nobody's around this area, he thought with a sigh of relief. Perfect.

It wasn't difficult for him to slide under a cordon and hail a taxi. He had never actually hailed a taxi before in his life, but he had seen enough Muggle movies when he was younger to know what it looked like.

"Where to?" the driver grunted as the young man slid in.

He thought for a second, and then gave the driver the name of the hotel. With another grunt, the driver swiveled into traffic and sped away from the cordoned road.

“Rough night, huh?” the driver asked, a trace of a grin on his face as he swiveled around the corner onto one of the main roads.

The young man grimaced. “A bit,” he replied shortly.

“The fun kind of rough?”

He could barely refrain from snorting in disdain at the ignorance. Sure, call it that. “I guess.”

The driver grinned widely, revealing crooked teeth. “That’s the best way, you know. Nice and rough so they’ll be aching for it next time. Friend or paid?”

The young man gritted his teeth. “Really not your business.”

The driver sighed with disappointment. “Okay, if that’s what you want. Ask no questions, get no lies. I’m okay with that.”

“Good.”

It wasn’t long before the taxi pulled up in front of the hotel. Shoving some notes in the surprised driver’s hand, the young man got out with a muttered, “Keep the change.”

The doors slid open and he headed straight towards the elevator. Perhaps they made it back and are waiting —

“Ah, Mr. Potter!”

He froze. He knew that voice. He had only heard it an hour or two before. He turned to see a blond man, dressed in a crisp black Muggle blazer wave him over.

“Hello,” he said warily. “What do you want?”

“For you to share my breakfast,” the blond man replied simply, gesturing towards the café attached to the hotel. “You must be hungry.”

He was hungry, but he was also exhausted. He had only caught a few minutes of sleep in the taxi, and his head was aching terribly. But then again, the young man thought suddenly, it would be better if I kept my eye on him...

"All right, then," he replied, following the blond man into the café. A waitress quickly showed them to a small table near a window.

"I must say," the blond man remarked with a small smile. "You have surprising stamina, Harry Potter."

Harry gave him a sharp stare as he slid into the seat. "I've been up all night, Crouch."

"As have I, Harry... may I call you Harry?" Barty Crouch asked, rubbing his jawline with a curiously contemplative look as he surveyed Harry.

Harry snorted with disgust. "You certainly did when I was back in your hospital, so I don't see why not. So why exactly aren't you collapsing from exhaustion – and where did you get the blazer?"

"I lived in this society for several years, Harry, and I have my wardrobe well-stocked. As for the exhaustion..." Crouch shrugged. "Training, I guess, is the only explanation for it. As is a steady supply of coffee."

They ordered drinks, and while Crouch was looking at the comely waitress, Harry slid his wand from his blazer pocket to point at the man across from him. I can't trust this Death Eater, even if Voldemort's story did make a degree of sense. Best to keep him on the defensive...

"How did you find me so quickly?" Harry asked in a low voice, once the waitress had left. "I specifically Apparated separately from you so that you couldn't follow me."

Crouch shrugged. "My secret. That, and the Parliament has one of the best magical tracking services available, and I'm authorized to use it as the Dark Lord's right hand man."

"From the looks of things, I thought Bellatrix occupied that position," Harry sneered.

Crouch grimaced. "There was a different progression of power, so to speak."

"Right. She slept with him."

The Death Eater clenched his fist. "The Dark Lord operates on the basis of cold reason, like any rational man. Miss LeStrange's... favours mean nothing to him, and he would dispose of her in an instant. However, she does contribute valuable skills to our cause."

"Your cause," Harry spat icily. "Not mine."

Crouch gave a twisted smile. "If you are taking on the Dark Lord's mission, Harry, you become his agent, Marked or not. You are effectively aiding his cause, no matter how much you will deny it."

"The mission's still on the table. I'm still not convinced it is worth my while. And frankly," Harry added in a low tone, "some hatred runs deep."

"You should put that behind you, Mr. Potter," Crouch said primly, as the waitress came with his coffee and Harry's tea. As soon as she was gone, Crouch smirked. "After all, that was in a different world."

"I killed your master in that world," Harry growled. "And I've got a wand pointed at you under the table."

"And I've got a dozen of my agents strewn around this café," Crouch replied airily. "Including Evan Rosier, one of my best. You can't threaten me here, Harry."

Harry quickly gazed around the room, his eyes fixing on each person. A few of the muscled workers in the corner he could guess were Crouch's, but who else? Most of the people just looked...normal.

"In any case, you should really dissuade yourself of the notion that you killed the Dark Lord," Crouch continued, oblivious to Harry's fear as he added cream to his coffee. "You reflected his curse – that's it."

"He still died."

"But not by your hand," Crouch said evenly. "It wasn't a clean Avada Kedavra Harry and you know it. You haven't killed – yet."

Harry gave Crouch a burning glare. "Keep talking and I might just try it."

The older man chuckled at this. "Harry, Harry, why the threats? I come to help you, not to kill you. Besides, as the Dark Lord already made perfectly clear, he doesn't want you dead. If anything, he would like your aid. According to him, your potential has been... stymied."

Harry frowned. "And how on earth does he reason that?"

"From what the Dark Lord told me, you grew up in the pocket of Albus Dumbledore," Crouch said evenly, setting his mug down and giving Harry a penetrating glare. "You were independent, but not to the point of truly being dangerous to the Dark Lord. You may have had some success on your own, but you never developed... a true independence."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Think about it. Do you think you are as smart as your father is?"

Harry's eyes widened. "So he is alive?"

"Yes, and before you ask, I do not know where he is. The Cyan League – the splinter of the Order of the Phoenix he is a member of – is difficult to track magically, and I do not have the manpower or the

inclination to look for them. So, do you think you are as smart as he is?”

Harry rubbed his temple. He really didn't know a lot about his father, when he really thought about it. “I'd like to think so.”

“What about your mother?”

“Again, I'd like to think so.”

Crouch leaned back in his chair. “I guess you're a real failure then – or you never had the motive to become truly independent.”

Harry flushed. “What's that supposed to mean, Crouch?”

“Well, your father became an Animagus in his fifth year, as did Black and Pettigrew. Your mother was one of the best students of her year, becoming Head Girl. Another in their year, Severus Snape, was inventing spells by his fourth and fifth years. So the thought arises: if you are as powerful and as smart as they are, what have you done?” Crouch mockingly took a swig of his coffee. “Were you just stupid or something?”

Harry began to rise to his feet. “I don't need to hear this.”

“No, you don't want to hear this,” Crouch replied sharply, leaning forward and fixing Harry with a deadly stare. “Sit down and listen to me, Harry Potter, for this is not all your fault. You have power – the Dark Lord does not deny this. He also does not deny that you are intelligent. He made the mistake of underestimating both of those qualities in your world, and look where it got him. But realize this: you could have done more.”

“Really?” Harry asked furiously. “In the space between fighting for my life and running from your kind?”

“Keep your voice down and sit down, Mr. Potter,” Crouch said coolly. “You would do well to hear this. And if you leave this table, you won't leave this café as enlightened as you could be.”

Harry glared at Crouch for a long few seconds before finally sitting down again. "Fine, then," he spat. "Enlighten me."

Crouch smiled slightly as he folded his hands together. "Harry, the Dark Lord realizes you have power and intellect, but you have not been given opportune chance or even motive to utilize them. In times of great danger, you have proven your worth. The best example, I think, is that of when you drove off over a hundred Dementors with a Patronus Charm in your third year."

"How do you know about that?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"Pettigrew watched from his rat form and informed the Dark Lord in your world, who in turn informed me," Crouch replied evenly. "You also proved adept with standard defense spells, even enough to take on a score of Death Eaters at the Ministry of Magic. Now I pose to you the question: the Dark Lord appeared there himself to kill you, so why didn't you fight back? Why didn't you, let's say, fire a Reductor Curse into the back of his head while he wasn't looking? The Dark Lord may be skilled, but he could have been driven into the same bodiless form he inhabited before if his mortal body was killed."

Harry thought back to that day, to that duel between Dumbledore and Voldemort. He tried to remember where he had been...

"Part of the statue of Magical Brethren was holding me out of the way," he said finally.

"And why didn't you learn advanced defensive magic while you were in Hogwarts for your sixth year?" Crouch pursued, taking another drink of coffee. "You must have known by that point of the Dark Lord's skill. Surely you must have realized that it would take extraordinary magic to defeat him. So why didn't you learn those extraordinary spells while you still had an excellent library from which to acquire them?"

Harry froze. That was a good point. Why on earth hadn't he looked for better defense magic while he was still at Hogwarts? He could have used it earlier... people wouldn't have had to die...

"And during your skipped seventh year, why didn't you search out magical lore, ancient spells, priceless tomes, or go abroad in search of more powerful magic, perhaps strong enough to bring down your foes?" Crouch asked, a grin growing on his face. "What were you doing, anyways? Camping?"

Harry flushed a deep red, for that was exactly what he had been doing. The way Crouch makes it sound, I was such an idiot...

"Rest assured, Mr. Potter, that the Dark Lord isn't surprised that you didn't interfere, of course," Crouch finished, setting his coffee mug down with a hollow clink. "You were inhibited from pursuing your true potential – all to our advantage."

"What?"

"You never developed true independence, Potter, while you were in Dumbledore's pocket," Crouch said coolly. "Forgive me, for I was not actually around during the last few years of your life, but Dumbledore's actions only made it less conducive for you to research or work on your own. You were relying on him – not a bad choice, but not exactly the wisest. If anything, you made the Dark Lord's efforts easier."

"How is this even relevant?" Harry snarled, glaring at the smugly smiling Crouch. "I could have done more, but it doesn't matter now, does it?"

"Oh, but it does," Crouch replied, leaning closer. "You see, for the first time in your short life, you are free of this nebulous prophecy. In this world, there was no prophecy, and there is no Dumbledore. You have no superiors, no elders, and no one here to whom you owe authority. So the question arises: whatever are you going to do, Harry Potter?" Crouch raised his hands in mocking astonishment. "As the Dark Lord pointed out, you are free to do whatever you wish. Have

you lost your purpose without the prophecy, or do you just have to redefine who you really want to be? Your life thus far, Mr. Potter, has been set around the destruction of your archenemy. Now that said goal has been achieved, what do you want?"

Harry looked steadily at the blond Death Eater across from him. "I want to get home – back to my world."

"A simple goal, but one that may very well to prove to be impossible," Crouch replied seriously. "The Dark Lord has been researching the breach for years now, and even he has not found an answer yet. What he has confirmed, however, is that the separate worlds may merge again. That is why he is tracking these tomes – because he wants to confirm this possibility, and hopefully manage the passage so that our world isn't annihilated, something that would be detrimental to all of us."

"So why do you need me?" Harry asked finally, running a hand through his hair. "You want me to work for my worst enemies, to betray my friends."

Crouch looked around. "I don't see any of your friends. How are you betraying them if you don't even know where they are? Besides, the Dark Lord is not your enemy any longer, Mr. Potter. He wouldn't care right or left whether you aided him on this mission or not. He just thinks it might be in your best interest."

"Big assumption," Harry sneered.

"I'll concede that point, but it's irrelevant, because that is not why I am here," Crouch said, finishing his coffee with a single swallow. "I'm here to provide you with aid and necessary equipment, should you choose to take on this mission."

"Awfully generous of you," Harry remarked suspiciously, eyeing the briefcase that Crouch had set on the table. Made of simple brown leather, it was unremarkable in every way possible.

Crouch snorted. "The Dark Lord delegated to me this task, Mr. Potter. It's not something I have any passionate desire to do."

"Death Eaters typically don't aid their former targets," Harry growled.

Crouch gave an exasperated sigh. "Harry, I don't even remember you or know you. To me, you are just another one of the Dark Lord's potential agents with a rather interesting back-story. If anything," he added, "I feel rather sorry for you."

Harry was stunned. "Sorry?"

"You never lived, Harry Potter," Crouch replied frankly. "You were always caught up in something or other, and your goals weren't ever really your own. They were either defined by prophecy, binding magic, or Dumbledore. You were fighting for something not because you wanted to, but because you had to. Frankly, I wouldn't be surprised if you threw this mission in my face and went to see a hooker in Knockturn Alley or one of the nicer joints in Diagon. Hell, I'd do that if I were you."

Harry went bright red. "H-hadn't even considered that," he replied, trying to regain his composure, despite the sly wink from Crouch.

"I'm just here," Crouch said, "to give you an opportunity to do something you might want to do. You have no obligations to the Dark Lord – as I said, you could throw this mission in my face – but you stand to gain a great deal, not to mention a powerful ally. Of course, it would always be beneficial to our organization if you agreed to the mission – you are a skilled wizard, albeit a bit behind the times in terms of magical innovations."

"I don't even know what's required of this mission," Harry said cautiously. "I'm not committing to anything until I know more... but then again, pretending to go along with Voldemort's scheme could be beneficial, at least in the short term. Best to appear reluctant, though. A sudden shift in temperament would make Crouch suspicious."

Crouch grinned slightly as he flipped open the clasps on his suitcase and turned it sideways as he opened it. Sliding his empty cup to the side, Harry was rather surprised to see a rather ordinary stack of white files in the suitcase.

“This,” Crouch began, “is documentation and information about this mission, if you’re choosing to accept it. Normally, this would not be released without a confirmed decision on your part, but the Dark Lord seems to think that if you were given the data, you might be more inclined to agree with us.”

“You don’t agree?” Harry asked, noting the rather disgruntled look on Crouch’s face as he slowly took the first file from the case.

“The mission protocol that I designed in these cases exists for a reason,” Crouch said with distaste. “It’s the only thing that separates us from gangs and terrorists. A certain level of bureaucracy is... required, if our government is perceived to be legitimate.”

“So is it?” Harry asked scornfully.

“It’s been fourteen years since the Dark Lord created the Parliament,” Crouch said slowly after a few seconds of thought, “and though there have been growing pangs, there has been no open warfare up until the terrorist insurgencies that have sprung up within the past few years. Even those have been confined to the criminal sectors of society, and as the only real government in place, we have kept the peace. As the Dark Lord told you, the former Ministry of Magic did not do so. At large, nationally and internationally, the wizarding community recognizes our legitimacy and the only attempts to undermine our government have come from... past insurgents and terrorists.”

“The Order of the Phoenix,” Harry spat, “don’t you consider them terrorists?”

“As detailed in these files, the Order of the Phoenix does not exist anymore,” Crouch replied sternly. “You’ll have to read through the papers, but when the organization split prior to Dumbledore’s death, it

lost any real ability to deal damage. The only remnant of the Order that could potentially stir up trouble for us is the Ash-Born."

"I've heard the term," Harry said with a frown. "Is there a chance I might... encounter such a group?"

"Possibly," Crouch said darkly, "but in such a case, I'd advise that you do not seek dealings with them. They are terrorists, Mr. Potter, and will not hesitate to use you to execute their schemes – nearly all which threaten our government and wizarding society at large."

"What if I find their offers better?" Harry snarled. "So far, I've only heard yours, and I'm still not inclined to accept it! Forgive me, Crouch, but it's a bit disturbing to find that the most accommodating group is those who were once my worst enemies and tried to kill me!"

"Ironical, don't you think?"

"That's not the point!"

"But it is," Crouch growled, his eyes blazing with cold fury. "We are the only ones who have offered you anything, Mr. Potter. To speak quite frankly, if the Ash-Born were to find you, your life expectancy would be measured in seconds. They would have no qualms about executing you, given what your position. If you are particularly unlucky, they will torture you for what you know about us and then publicly execute you. There would be no dealings with them."

"You sound certain," Harry remarked skeptically. "What makes you so sure?"

"We've lost people who've tried to negotiate with their organization," Crouch growled. "Some were even expected to be accepted by this group. But we soon realized that terrorists like them only have one priority: to destroy what we have built, no matter what the cost. As soon as we realized this, any sort of 'negotiations' ended."

“There’s a flaw in your logic,” Harry remarked finally, after a few tense seconds. “How are you so sure that they’d kill me? I thought you said before they’d use me.”

“They’d use you by making sure your death sent a very vibrantly gory message,” Crouch replied grimly. “We’ve seen it before.”

“I’m sure,” Harry muttered, flipping open another file to see a picture of a book, bound in blue-black leather and embossed with dull grey runes. “What’s this?”

“Ah, that’s what we like that you recover,” Crouch said, brightening immediately as he saw the picture. “The Dark Lord described it amply for you – and stressed its importance.”

“I still don’t see why you think that I would be valuable in this search,” Harry said, rubbing his temple in frustration. “Don’t you have professionals or something for this?”

“The Dark Lord feels that it would be wise to offer this chance to you,” Crouch retorted smoothly, “and despite its importance, he feels that with your vested interest in returning to your own world, you would be the ideal choice for the mission. Of course, you won’t be working alone. Two Shiy-Mord will be with you, and you’ll be meeting them at Kings’ Cross tomorrow; details about the rendezvous are in the suitcase. They are some of our best agents, and I hope you work... well with them.”

There was a catch to Crouch’s voice – barely noticeable, but Harry heard it. He doesn’t like these Shiy-Mord... I wonder why? Must have something to do with their connection to Bellatrix...

“So where exactly is this book?” Harry asked with a frown as he slid the file back on top of the stack. “Some safe house?”

“That’s what all our intelligence indicates,” Crouch replied. “Unfortunately, despite the fact we have located some of the safe houses of the Renegade Phoenixes and the Cyan League, they move

very quickly at even the slightest hint of detection. The other organizations, like IT and the Ash-Born, move constantly.”

“You didn’t mention the other groups – MKT and the Others,” Harry said sharply. “And you called MKT terrorists last night during your speech at the club and then tried to have the leaders killed.”

“You’re partially wrong – I said they were affiliated with terrorists,” Crouch said coolly. “And I will be checking that particular bit of intelligence as soon as I return to the Parliament, as their reaction implies last night does imply otherwise. In any case, MKT is primarily a muggle criminal organization in any case – a concern to us, but not to the degree of magical terrorist groups. They may have a few wizards, as our intelligence indicates, but not many. And as for the Others...” Crouch was silent for a few seconds. “I wouldn’t even be inclined to consider them a criminal organization; as such terms imply leadership and direction. The Others simply cause chaos with no real direction or pattern – which makes them incredibly difficult to track.”

“So if your intelligence is having so much difficulty, what makes you think I’ll be able to do any better?” Harry asked incredulously.

“For the reasons I already said, plus the fact that we’ve never assigned Shiy-Mord to this mission before. Mostly they’ve been concentrated in... other areas.” Crouch restrained a grimace. “That’s not the point, though. In this suitcase is everything you could need for this mission: the files with requisite data, the key to your new bank vault in Diagon Alley, a compact Muggle pistol –”

“What, so your agents use guns now?” Harry asked, a hint of disgust in his voice. He couldn’t understand why Nicci did it – why fire a gun when a wand worked just as well and had more versatility?

Crouch rolled his eyes. “I’ve seen that reaction many times. It is a Glock 38 adjusted for a ten round magazine – nothing that special, but handy in emergencies. Muggle police occasionally carry this as well. Of course, a wand is nearly always preferable to a gun, but when disarmed, it serves as a quick alternative. Now, a wandshot

gauntlet is also inside this suitcase, but I'd prefer that we don't bring that out in public."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Really."

"No need to be sarcastic, Mr. Potter. It appears to simply be a rather worn piece of curved leather. Place it on top of your wand hand when you wish to don the gauntlet. A twist of your wrist will remove it. Now that gauntlet was designed for increased firepower – have you ever cast a spell with multiple wands before?"

"Once," Harry said, remembering when he had nearly blasted Fenrir Greyback through the ceiling of Malfoy Manor with a triple Stunning Spell.

"Then you know the power of such a device like this. The enchantments on the gauntlet allow you to insert up to four wands inside and then cast spells without the required somatic components – the wand-waving and such. Simply aim and cast at your target, and the gauntlet will trigger the wands and cast their magic simultaneously. Our specialists are currently working on improving the design to feature a 'repeater-fire' feature, but that might take a few years to iron out." Crouch snorted with disappointment. "Unfortunately, wands require a great deal of work to craft, and without several months of work, we could not supply you with additional ones besides the two you already own."

Harry sighed. "Anything else?"

"Nothing but a single question: are you going to aid us?"

Harry put a hand to his forehead. He was tired and barely remaining straight in his seat, but his mind was blazing. He didn't trust Crouch or Voldemort or any of their 'Parliament', and he was disturbed by their willingness to cooperate with him. I personally destroyed all of Voldemort's Horcruxes in our world – why would he want to work with me?

Then there was the mission – something about it gave Harry an edgy feeling. He didn't know a lot about it. Crouch had been astounding generous in providing equipment and allies, but he had not really mentioned many details about the mission itself. It sounds too simple... just track down a book and return it? But on the other hand, if I have to track down the safe houses, this could take months...

And then there were the allies – the Shiy-Mord. From the way Lupin reacted when he thought Ginny was one, and from the explanation I heard from Voldemort, I really don't know anything about them, except that they're incredibly dangerous, and likely to turn on me if I do anything against Voldemort or Bellatrix...

And that's not even counting my allies – what would Ginny say when she hears about this? What would Draco think when he hears that I might take up a job with his old master? And Nicci... hell, I don't even know what that woman would think...

“Well, Harry?” Crouch asked, a small grin on his face.

But on the other hand, Crouch did make a good point – and I'd be finally taking action for something I want, not because of some damned prophecy. And all this information might indicate something about where my parents are... if I could find them...

He finally reached across the table and snapped the suitcase shut, pulling it towards him. “Fine, I'll do it.”

Crouch nodded once, all business now. “Good. A pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Potter.” He got up primly from his table and turned to leave, but stopped. Reaching his hand into his blazer pocket, he pulled out a small square device. “By the way, Mr. Potter, I think this belongs to you.”

Harry's eyes widened in shock as Crouch put the cell phone on the table. He had completely forgotten about the phone – how had he lost it? Crouch must have taken it before I woke up in that hospital...

He flipped it open and scanned through the contacts that Nicci had instructed him to put in – her number, Ginny's and Malfoy's.

He paused: which number should he call first? Not Nicci... she's irrational to the extreme and would probably kill something if I told her what I'm doing. And I can't tell Ginny yet – she needs the full explanation, and that's something I can only give in person.

Shaking his head at his own act, he selected Draco's number.

* * *

Draco swore blindly as he sat up from the couch he had been sleeping on. Something was ringing – ringing loudly – and it sounded close...

With a groan, he pulled his jacket off the chair nearby and rifled through the pockets, quickly finding the Muggle cell phone. Of all the things...

Cursing Nicci with all his heart and soul for convincing him to buy the damned device, he carefully jabbed the button that would answer the call.

"What do you want?"

"Draco, it's Harry."

Draco toppled off of his couch in shock. It didn't help he was rather precariously balanced when he answered the phone. Swearing again, he carefully held the phone to his head, his eyes nervously locking on Ginny, who was sleeping on another couch in the room. She's still sleeping soundly from the looks of things – lucky little Weasley – by why on earth would Potter call me instead of her?

"You woke me up," Draco growled in a low tone, getting to his feet and heading out into the darkened hall. "This better be good."

"Where are you?"

“A better question would be where you are!” Draco snarled. “You vanished somehow from the back of K-Crank’s car –”

“I don’t know how that happened, all right, so just calm down! I’m at the hotel right now and I’m heading up to our room. Any chance that Nicci’s there?”

“How am I supposed to know?” Draco asked furiously. “You vanish out of thin air, leaving me with your girlfriend, and –”

“She’s not my girlfriend!” Harry hissed. “It’s... well, it’s more complicated than that right now!”

“Clearly,” Draco replied dryly, an edge still in his voice. “How did you get back to the hotel?”

“I hailed a taxi.”

“You did what?”

“Honestly, you know what that is –”

“I know what hailing a taxi is, Potter!” Draco snapped. “How on earth were you just able to ‘hail a taxi?’ You’ve got some explaining to do, and you better do it fast.”

“I haven’t got time to go through all the details right now, Malfoy, just shut up and listen,” Harry snarled, and Draco could detect real frustration and anger in his voice – and tenseness that Draco had never heard before. Well, well, something’s got Potter on edge... “Where are you right now?”

“MKT safe house,” Draco replied in a low voice. “But not for long – K-Crank has tickets for us to get out of the country.”

“You’re, you’re leaving the country?” Harry asked, his anger replaced with shock. “Where are you going?”

“Somewhere that’s not here,” Draco replied curtly. “And I even got your little girlfriend to agree with me about it. Right now Keith’s not letting us leave the safe house until it’s safe, so odds are you’ll have to meet us at the airport if you want to follow us.”

“I can’t... look, when’s your flight?”

“I think sometime tomorrow night.”

“Tell Keith to cancel my ticket. I’m not leaving yet.”

“Are you crazy?” Draco asked, furious. “Don’t you have any idea how dangerous it is to stay here –”

“More than you know, Draco,” Harry cut him off abruptly. “Look, I can’t explain everything to you over the phone, but I’ve got a job to do back here that might help us get home – you know, back to our world.”

“What do you know that I don’t, Potter?”

“I can only tell you in person.” The frustration was heavy in Harry’s voice. “Look, I can’t explain it all – hell, I don’t understand most of it, but I’m not leaving with you.”

“You can’t tell me –”

“Draco, if you want to hear this in person, meet me outside of that hairstylist shop we visited tomorrow around noon. It’ll be the only time you get an explanation from me.”

“What’s with the secrecy, Potter?” Draco asked suspiciously. “What are you trying to hide?”

“I told you, I can’t explain all of this to you over the phone! And come alone – I don’t want Ginny mixed up in this mess. Don’t tell her I called either.”

“Are you fucking insane? What the hell is wrong with you?” Draco asked, astonishment and fury warring for dominance in his voice.

“Nothing’s wrong with me – if anything, I’m seeing things a lot more clearly. Now swear that you won’t tell Ginny about this.”

“You can’t –”

“Swear it, Malfoy!”

“All right, fine, but what am I –”

The phone clicked. Draco could only look at the phone in complete fury as he heard the line go dead.

* * *

“Something’s going wrong.”

“You think, Croaker?”

“Why the hell didn’t we intervene? It would have been the perfect time!”

“And you’re the one who is always telling me not to intervene.”

“I didn’t say... oh, forget it! You’re impossible, you know?”

“No. I just planned this.”

“...Wait, you planned for this to happen?”

“Roughly. I didn’t foresee him actually taking the job, though. That just makes this matter a little more... interesting...”

“How the hell do you get that, Garren? He’s exhausted, barely thinking straight –”

“And yet nearly everything Crouch said was true.”

“That may be true, but I can’t believe you’re letting this happen –”

“What exactly am I supposed to do, Croaker? We’ve already interfered to some degree – any more and she will begin to figure things out! She’s the reason things became like this, you know! Her fingers have been in this mess with both worlds for decades now! And the last thing we need is for her to find us. We can’t fight her, Croaker – not while we’re trapped here.”

“So what’s your next plan, then? Are you going to try and manipulate him into freeing us?”

“It’s an idea, but I’m sticking thus far to the plan: preparing our little team so that they are capable of fighting her on an even playing field – well, as even of one as we can create.”

“She’s been skewing this field for a long time... and this group has barely even seen most of their world yet. The parallels haven’t all been connected. I thought that was your plan – to connect the parallels.”

“A noble goal, but insufficient. We need to speed up the timeframe.”

“Be careful with your words.”

“You know what I mean, Croaker! Considering how things are progressing, we might need to reevaluate our options.”

“You’re talking about sacrificing them, aren’t you?”

“Possibly.”

“Damn it, Garren, you can’t just sacrifice your players at this stage of the game! We have those four – that’s it! And she’s bound to destroy at least one of them in the end.”

“At least.”

There was a very long pause, and then:

“You knew, Croaker, that not all of them would leave this alive. You knew this before we even initiated this plan.”

“It doesn’t mean I have to like it, Garren. And I’m not like you, feeling that we can sacrifice their lives if we have to.”

There was a chuckle. “By now, Croaker, you should know I have no qualms about sacrificing lives. It is souls I will not risk losing.”

